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GAY REPRESENTATION, QUEER RESISTANCE, AND THE SMALL SCREEN: A reception study of gay representations among Flemish fans of contemporary television fiction

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the fruitful insights of queer theory, this study departs from the notion that popular culture can function as articulations of resistance to the discourse of heteronormativity that is being reiterated and consolidated in popular culture products. In particular, this study focuses on the potential of gay representation (representations of those who are identified and/or self-identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual) in contemporary television fiction to resist heteronormative institutions, practices, norms and values. Previous textual studies on popular series (namely *The Wire*, *Family Guy*, *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, *Torchwood* and *True Blood*) have argued that these series represent gay characters and gay-related themes that, on the one hand, expose how the discursive practices of heteronormativity function, and on the other, transgress social and cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality and identity and thereby function as queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. Since articulations of resistance only become resistant in the act of reading, this study wants to explore how television audiences negotiate the meaning of gay representation and its potential to resist. First, it studies how Flemish fans of contemporary television fiction read gay representation, and in particular, how they read the articulations of resistance embedded in the text. Second, it inquires whether or not the fans assume a heteronormative or resistant discursive position in their readings of the gay representations. To this end, an exploratory reception analysis confronts the results of a sample of textual analyses that have illustrated how popular series can resist to the discourse of heteronormativity, with the readings of the fans.

PREFACE

This working paper is part of the research project "Out On Screen: A research into the social and emancipating role of queer representations in contemporary screen culture, using a queer theory perspective" (2008-2011), financed by the Scientific Research Council, Flanders Belgium (FWO). Inspired by Stuart Hall's politics of representation (Hall, 1997), and post-structuralist queer theory (e.g., Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner; 1999), this research wants to obtain a better insight in the social and emancipating role of gay representation in contemporary screen culture. The project departs from the given that even though gay representation has increased in contemporary popular culture, this increase does not by definition defy the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity. Nonetheless, drawing on the notion of cultural resistance, this project wants to inquire how and to what extent gay representation in popular screen culture can resist heteronormativity.

Second, this project has formed the basis for the PhD project entitled "Queer Resistance on the Small Screen: a queer theoretical research into the social and emancipating role of gay representations in contemporary television fiction". This PhD project brings television fiction into focus. More specifically, it studies by means of thematic textual analyses how contemporary popular series (e.g., *Six Feet Under*, *Family Guy*,…) may articulate resistance through its representations of gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters. In addition, it looks at how fans of contemporary television fiction negotiate the meaning of the gay representations and its potential to resist heteronormativity. The results of this reception analysis of gay representation among Flemish fans of contemporary television fiction are discussed in this working paper.

i   Alexander is one of the 32 participants in the focus group research. For more details on the abbreviations added in front of each quote, see Method.

ii   The concept of "gay" will be used as a general term that refers to those who are identified and/or self-identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

INTRODUCTION

Alexander (FG7, G, M, 27y): They are not very convincing. They look like a typical gay television couple. They look straight, they act straight, they walk straight, they dress straight, they give men hugs, and they are supposed to represent a gay couple? I did not believe that.[i]

From the 1990s on, contemporary Western television culture has increased and diversified its televised gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Davis & Needham, 2009; Hart, 2000). Some characters have been promoted to recurring or main characters, some have outgrown the rigid and heavily gendered stereotypes, and some are no longer portrayed as sad and lonely. However, this does not imply that contemporary gay[ii] representation has been exempt from scrutiny. Rodger Streitmatter (2009, pp. 186-188) for instance stresses that gay characters are still represented as different from heterosexual characters, foremost when it comes to the absence of representing gay sexual activity. Guillermo Avila-Saavedra (2009, pp. 5, 19) takes it one step further, arguing that what is lacking in much contemporary gay representation is the notion of queer. Like other scholars (e.g., Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Needham, 2009; Provencher, 2005), he postulates that there is nothing resistant or "queer" about gay television when gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are represented as subordinate to the hegemonic supremacy of heteronormativity. He argues that gays are depicted as merely reiterating and consolidating patriarchal and traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Both his argument and conceptualization of the notion queer draw on queer theory, in which the realm of popular media is considered one of many social and cultural institutions dominated by heteronormativity. Queer theorists (e.g., Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner; 1999) interpret heteronormativity as the discursive power granted to the compulsory heterosexual matrix in Western society. The matrix relies upon fixed notions of gender, sexuality and identity, and veils its constructedness and anomalies by feigning universality and rendering the heteronormative discourse hegemonic. In this way, it succeeds in depreciating, despising or excluding those who do not comply or conform to the demands of the heteronormative discourse which are materialized in institutions (e.g., marriage), practices (e.g., reproduction), and a rigid set of norms and values (e.g., stability, monogamy, longevity). However, equally important in queer theory is the notion that social and cultural sites and institutions can harbour resistance. Specifically, popular television as a cultural site can offer resistance to the hegemony of heteronormativity. Drawing on Stuart Hall (2005, p. 71), who considers popular culture a site that both embraces and resists hegemonic culture, popular television fiction may embed gay representation that can be considered queer. Within this context, queer refers to all human beings who do not consider their sexual identity and/or desire in terms of binary and exclusive categories, and/or articulate sexual and gender identity positions that subvert or diverge from what is discursively constructed as normal in heteronormative institutions and practices. Hence, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual characters can be represented as engaged in queer practices, for instance

articulating identity positions that oppose or challenge heteronormative gender and sexual identities, or embracing transgressive norms and values instead of the prescribed, traditional set of norms and values.

A few studies have pointed out the potential of popular television fiction to resist heteronormativity by unraveling or underscoring the queerness articulated within the television text (e.g., Chambers, 2009; Needham, 2009). However, Chambers (2009, p. 21) for instance, is fully aware of his status as reader, and stresses that his analysis should be considered a queer reading, which is a practice of reading that has been elaborated by Alexander Doty (2000, p. 2). Doty describes a queer reading as an inquiry of why a text can be understood as queer, rather than a practice that makes a text queer. Both Chambers and Doty recognize their reading position as individual and prefigured. Their perspective on reading positions stems from a cultural studies' perspective that underscores the role of audiences in the process of making meaning of texts. Within cultural studies, audiences are considered plural entities, whose negotiation of meaning is understood as a complex process where the social and cultural context of audiences intervene in the reading process, resulting in multiple readings (Meers, 2004, p. 165; Jensen, 2002, p. 162; Seiter, 2004, p. 456). In particular, Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model (1980) stresses that interpretation of a text may range from a preferred or hegemonic reading, over a negotiated reading, to an oppositional or counter-hegemonic reading. Even though the model has not been spared of criticism[iii], it offers a refined perspective on the relation between audiences and hegemonic discourses, and opens up the position for readers to oppose hegemonic meanings. This potential for resistant readings has been further discussed by John Fiske (1987) who underscores the power of television viewers to become active readers who, through negotiation and renegotiation of the text, may subvert and resist the dominant ideology. Nonetheless, Ien Ang (1996, pp. 9-14) underlines that active audiences are not by definition critical and resistant audiences. On the one hand, audiences are forced to be active in a media-saturated culture whereas their range of choices and making meaning can be manipulated into a media consumption that "sustains the reproduction of the system" (p. 12). On the other hand, Ang (p. 12) argues the "right choices" cannot be imposed, which leaves room for subversion. Similarly, Andrew Tudor (1999, p. 194) stresses that audiences need to be understood as both social agents and social subjects, implying that being and acting as a social agent comes from the social structures that made social subjects acting as social agents. Taking this dialectic perspective on audiences into account, television audiences can be considered either prefigured by and/or susceptible to the discursive practices of heteronormativity embedded within popular television, or aware of and/or able to resist the heteronormative hegemony. Furthermore, since popular culture itself has been argued to produce and articulate resistance, audiences may as well be skeptical to or pleased with the articulations of queer resistance within popular television texts. Hence, the aim of this study is twofold. First, it studies how television audiences read gay representation. In addition, this study

iv   It needs to be stressed that queer resistance is not exclusively reserved for gays, lesbians, or bisexuals. Heterosexual characters can as well subvert heteronormative practices. However, since the scope of this research is limited to gay representation, heterosexual representation will not be studied in terms of queer resistance.

v   Even though the series will be discussed in more detail throughout the working paper, I will introduce each series shortly. The first series is the American drama series *The Wire* (HBO), which presents itself as a truthful and authentic representation of several Baltimore institutions and the city's shape-shifting crime scene. The series features several gay characters, for instance stickup guy Omar Little and detective Kima Greggs. The second series is the American adult animated sitcom *Family Guy* (FOX), which is centered on an all-American suburban middle class family. Even though the series does not feature outspoken gay characters, it nonetheless tackles gay issues, and from time to time rearticulates its heterosexual characters as gay. The third series is the American family drama series *Six Feet Under* (HBO), which revolves around a family who lost the pater familias and who are left with his funeral home. One of the sons is David Fisher, a closeted gay man who has a relationship with Keith Charles. Next, the selection features the American family dramedy *Brothers & Sisters* (ABC). Like *Six Feet Under*, the series features a family who lost the father. One of the sons is Kevin Walker, an openly gay man who is married to Scotty Wandell. The fifth series is the British science fiction series *Torchwood* (BBC). Its main hero is captain Jack Harkness, a bisexual superhero who cannot die. The last preselected series is the American fantasy series *True Blood* (HBO), a series in which vampires are integrating in mainstream society. The series features an openly gay man, named Lafayette Reynolds.

focuses on how they read the representations of gay characters[iv] that can be argued to articulate notions of queer resistance. Second, it inquires whether or not television audiences assume a heteronormative or resistant discursive position in their readings of the gay representations. To this end, an exploratory reception analysis confronts the results of a sample of textual analyses that have illustrated the potential for queer resistance of a selection of contemporary popular television series that feature gay characters and/or gay-related themes (namely *The Wire*, *Family Guy*, *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, *Torchwood* and *True Blood*[v]), with the readings of Flemish fans of contemporary television fiction.

QUEER RESISTANCE IN POPULAR TELEVISION FICTION

Before discussing the readings of fans of television fiction, it is necessary to elaborate on how popular television series can articulate queer resistance. Since heteronormativity is the dominant discourse in contemporary television fiction, the inclusion of gay characters does not suffice to resist to its hegemonic position. Gay characters may be argued to challenge a television reality with exclusively heterosexual characters, their representations embed few resistance when they are being articulated as homonormative. Homonormativity refers to the alignment of gay causes with dominant discursive institutions and practices, and to the appropriation by gays of heteronormative norms and values (e.g., a longing for stability and monogamy) (Duggan, 2003; Stryker, 2008). On the other hand, popular television series will not articulate blunt and transgressive queer politics, since popular television is a site that is socially and culturally structured by the discourse of heteronormativity. Instead, articulations of resistance within popular television fiction will rather be shaped by practices of subversion. Drawing on Judith Butler (1999, pp. 127, 198-201), subversion is here considered a set of strategies aimed at destabilizing fixed notions of gender and sexuality, and questioning their hegemonic positions from within dominant social and cultural systems. Queer resistance will not set out to abolish the dominant discourse of heteronormativity and how it shapes gender and sexual identities, but rather renegotiate gender and sexual identities from within the social and cultural structures. Doing so, queer resistance may on the one hand be articulated by strategies of queer deconstruction, which aim to expose how the discursive practices of heteronormativity function, or by strategies of queer reconstruction, which aim to transgress social and cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality and identity and thereby function as queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living.

1. Strategies of Queer Deconstruction

A first set of strategies is labeled as strategies of queer deconstruction, which draws on Jacques Derrida's (1987) conceptualization of deconstruction. This study agrees with Jonathan Culler's (2008) interpretation of deconstruction as a critical inquiry and dismantling of conceptual oppositions that has once proven fundamental and universal to specific disciplines. By arguing that these naturalized oppositions are in fact constructions, produced by frameworks and discursive practices, their binary relation becomes unstable, implied hierarchies become inversed, their meaning infinite, and their relationship non-exclusive. Within queer theory, deconstruction is crucial to the understanding of sexual and gender identities as social constructions, and to the defiance of sexual and gender binaries as well as the privileging of the heterosexual majority (Seidman, 1995, p. 125; Sullivan, 2003, p. 51). In particular, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and Judith Butler (1999) have postulated deconstructions of the heterosexual and homosexual opposition. Sedgwick (1990, pp. 8-

10) has challenged the given that the gender of object choice has become the only dimension of sexual orientation, and has deconstructed the binary divide of heterosexuality versus homosexuality to reveal a continuum with multiple and fluctuating identity positions as well as sexual desires, and how both categories are intertwined with one another in an unstable relationship, instead of being symmetrically opposed. She argues that the term homosexual is subordinated to the term heterosexual while the latter depends upon the exclusion and subordination of the first. Likewise, Butler (1999, pp. 186, 192) has deconstructed homosexual and heterosexual identities. She argues that categories of desire, sex and gender are performative instead of being expressions of the inner core of the subject. These identity categories have been discursively constituted, and are being produced and reiterated for the purpose of the heterosexual matrix, which depends upon fixed and binary sex, gender and desire categories.

Other deconstructive practices that draw on these queer theoretical notions have critically assessed different social and cultural institutions that reiterate heteronormative discourses. With regard to a queer theoretical inquiry of popular culture, Nikki Sullivan (2003, p. 190) stresses that it allows to question how popular culture produces and reproduces meaning and identities through its textual and intertextual strategies, and to inquire the different reading perspectives and reading practices of audiences. For instance, the queer readings by Doty (1993, 2000) and Alan Sinfield (2005) set out to expose the queerness undeniably present within the text, but concealed or repressed by discourses of heteronormativity. Hence, their work is also illustrative for what Steven Seidman (1995, p. 125) describes as the potential of queer theoretical projects, namely to turn a textual critique into a social critique.

Looking closely at the subject of gay representation in popular television fiction, queer deconstruction can be considered a reading strategy, used to reveal how the discourse of heteronormativity embedded in a given text contradicts itself. However, queer deconstruction can also be a representational strategy, where queer resistance comes from within the articulations of the text itself, and where heteronormativity is resisted from within. Put otherwise, even though one of the dominant discourses in popular television fiction is heteronormativity, it can be resisted from within popular television culture itself, by articulations of gay characters and/or gay-related themes that defy and subvert the privileging of the heterosexual matrix, and help unsettling the reiteration and consolidation of compulsory heterosexuality and its rigid set of heteronormative norms and values[vi]. In acknowledging these representations as resistant, this approach responds to the criticisms uttered by scholars who have elaborated on the limits of queer reading practices. For instance, Sullivan (2003, p. 193) argues that queer reading practices are focused on the uncovering of hidden queerness and repressed desires in mainstream texts, and thus implies that queer reading practices alone are not sufficient as resistant practices. Likewise, Henry Jenkins (1995) and Robin Roberts (1999) underscore the importance of representing gay characters who transgress being a subtextual

"Other" to empower the gay and queer community and challenge the binary divides between the heteronormative centre and the queer margin. Hence, gay representations that can be interpreted as critical and resistant articulations, allow queer deconstruction to be negotiated within the text itself, instead of being the sole result of a resistant reading of a non-resistant, heteronormative text.

2. Strategies of Queer Reconstruction

Gay representations that go beyond exposing the way heteronormativity governs people into fixed gender and sexual beings, belong to the articulations of queer reconstruction. These representations are part of representational strategies that offer queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. They depend upon and evoke queer deconstructions since they build upon the questioning of heteronormative norms and values, and explore alternatives to the dismantled identity positions considered essential to the consolidation of the heterosexual matrix. As with deconstruction, the defiance comes from within the discourse of heteronormativity, where its discursive practices become rearticulated and queered. This practice of queering or reconstructing from within the hegemonic discourse draws on Michel Foucault's argument that resistance to a hegemonic discourse needs to come from within the discourse (1978, pp. 95-96). Like Butler's conceptualization of subversion (1999, pp. 127, 198-201), resistance needs to be formed within a given social reality and its institutions. Within these discursive spaces and institutions, the productive power can be bent to emancipating goals. Hence, through rearticulations of gender and sexual identities into queer identities, reversals or inversions of the heteronormative centre and the queer margins, and renegotiations of heteronormative institutions, practices, norms and values, queer reconstructions can be subversively written into popular television series.

3. Queer Resistance and Audiences

Even though it has been argued that queer deconstruction and queer reconstruction can nevertheless be articulated within the text by representational strategies, they depend upon audiences to be read as resistant. Resistance may exist within the text, for instance in the shape of rearticulated gender and sexual identities, its interpretations among the viewing audiences can vary. Audiences can read it as resistant, where gender play for instance may expose the way social and cultural discourses are holding up fixed gender identity positions that human beings articulate through their docile bodies. In contrast, they can read it as abnormal, where gender play is seen as a deviation from what is considered socially accepted by mainstream society. As such, a text only becomes resistant in the act of reading.

Taking a cultural studies approach on audiences into account (see also "Introduction"), the way audiences read gay representations depends firstly upon their personal, social and cultural background. Certain identity traits interfere in the reading process of gay representations, foremost the identity axes of gender and sexual orientation. Similarly, one's social involvement, engagement and experience with gay-related issues play a role in the reading process. Also the cultural environment of audiences is addressed. In particular, differences in background are probable when television fiction series transcend the national boundaries, and attract international audiences. Next, one's relation to specific television series may interact with the way they read its gay representations, which may range from a fan perspective who is actively articulating his or her relationship to the series, to a viewer whose commitment to a certain series is rather low and who only watches episodes or fragments from the series. Further, modes of reception may vary, ranging from a focused and active viewer, to a multitasking viewer who is simultaneously busy with other daily activities in the domestic environment where television is being watched. Last, aspects of distribution interfere with the way one watches the series, especially since digitalization and globalization have paved the way for other viewing habits, such as watching the series on DVD, or watching it online, because of the (illegal) proliferation of digital downloads of these popular television series. Hence, the reception of gay representations will rather occur within a complex process of negotiation, where the television viewers may or may not read resistance into the articulations that, from a queer theoretical perspective, may be considered queer, and where they may or may not recognize other representations as articulations of queer resistance. Furthermore, since the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity not only governs popular culture but as well its consumers, viewers of popular television fiction also negotiate their interpretations in relation to mainstream society's set of rigid values and norms, and may or may not articulate a heteronormative or resistant position, not only to the text but as well to the mechanisms that govern heteronormativity.

METHOD

Because of this complex model of reception and interpretation, the assumption that audiences can read resistance in the texts would benefit from an empirical study that transcends a theoretical interpretation of audiences and resistance. This study thus agrees with Nick Stevenson (2002, pp. 100,101) who criticizes Fiske for substituting his own reading experience for that of the audience and thereby only theoretically conceptualizes audiences as active and resistant. Nonetheless, Fiske (1987) rightly stresses the potential of a television text to resist. That is why this study follows Klaus Bruhn Jensen's (2002, p. 167) interpretation of reception analysis, in which he proposes the necessity of achieving a balance between the study of media discourses and how they are interpreted by its audiences. Since there are many modes of reception, this study addresses television viewers who consider themselves television fans in general. Within the scope of this study, a fan is considered someone who expresses an enthusiast, active, and productive engagement with a specific text. He or she claims a relationship with the text, and participates in the reproduction and redistribution of the text's meaning, as well as the critiquing and the rewriting of it (see Fiske, 1989; Jenkins, 1992). However, Fiske (1989, p. 147) also argues that fans make clear distinctions between the cultural products they like, and the ones they dislike. Hence, this study has taken into account that viewers who consider themselves fans of series in general may articulate different relationships with specific series. For that reason, the audiences on which this study focuses are viewers who consider themselves fans of contemporary television fiction in general, but may articulate different relationships with specific series.

Particularly, this study departs from the results of a sample of textual analyses on queer resistance in popular television series. The studied sample consists of *The Wire*, *Family Guy*, *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, *Torchwood* and *True Blood*. These series were chosen because of their international appeal and popularity, their representation of gay characters and gay-related themes, and their potential to illustrate strategies of queer resistance within popular television series. Additionally, each of these series has been argued to embed both discursive articulations of heteronormativity and resistance. These textual analyses on the resistance articulated in the preselected series have formed the basis for a reception analysis among television fans. The selection of scenes for the reception study was made based on the intention to create a diverse yet comprehensible overview of different strategies of resistance. This selection of scenes was shown and discussed during the focus group interviews. The method of focus groups was chosen since our research question demands a qualitative method that allows to thoroughly explore and compare how groups articulate opinions and experiences (Morgan, 1998). The focus group participants were recruited via a snowball sampling. A print and digital invitation was distributed, aimed at television viewers who consider themselves fans of contemporary television fiction. They were invited to participate in a research on the representation of gays, lesbians and bisexuals[vii]. In order to

viii Also here, gay should be interpreted as signifying "gay", "lesbian", or "bisexual". Participants were asked to cross out sexual identity positions so only one remained. They could chose between "heterosexual", "rather heterosexual", "bisexual", "rather gay/lesbian", "gay/lesbian". For practical reasons, those who identify as "rather heterosexual" and "heterosexual" were grouped together, and those who identify as "bisexual", "rather gay/lesbian", or "gay/lesbian" were grouped together. Throughout this research report, the first group will be referred to as the group with heterosexual participants, and the second group will be referred to as the group with gay participants.

ix See note vi.

x See note vi.

xi Two participants who participated in the first focus group session, were not able to participate in the second focus group session. As such, one group (FG5) consisted out of six participants.

participate, they had to be between 18 and 35 years old, willing to talk about issues related to gay sexuality, and able to participate twice. Yet, because of the differences in relationships with the preselected series, the participants were not required to consider themselves fan of every preselected series. However, they were expected to have seen at least one of the six preselected series in full, and at least one season of two other series from the pre-selection. Hence, television fans were looked for, but they were allowed to have little or no relationship with some of the series. 32 candidates who fulfilled the conditions were selected. Since sexual orientation was considered a crucial identity axis, 16 candidates were selected who describe their sexual identity as gay, and 16 candidates who identify themselves as heterosexual[viii]. In addition, gender was taken into account, even though the final selection has a higher proportion of male participants (see table 1).

TABLE **1**   *Overview of the participants' gender and sexual orientation*

	Heterosexual[ix] participants	Gay[x] participants	
Male	7	10	17
Female	9	6	15
	16	16	N = 32

Each participant was designated to two focus group sessions. In the first session, the participants were divided among four focus groups of eight participants each. In the first focus group session, two groups of heterosexual participants and two groups of gay participants were formed. Each group consisted of female and male participants. For this first round, the separation of sexual orientation was chosen because of the topic of the focus group. Since it is important for participants to feel comfortable talking in group about the sensitive topic, the creation of a homogenous group helps the participants to relate to one another and share opinions and interpretations in group. In addition, creating different homogenous groups allows to compare groups that may differ in opinion and interpretation on the subject matter (Morgan, 1998, pp. 58-64). In the second focus group session, the same participants were rearranged into four new focus groups. This time, each group consisted out of both heterosexual and gay participants[xi]. This rearrangement is motivated by the assumption that the interaction between gay and heterosexual participants could possibly produce new opinions and interpretations (Dewaele, Vincke, Cox & Dhaenens, 2009, p. 11). With regard to the participants, it should also be noted that each one lives in Flanders, the Northern region of Belgium, which makes them part of an international audience whose social and cultural background differs from audiences in the countries of production, which are in each case, except for British series *Torchwood*, American audiences. A major difference between American and Belgian audiences is the way gay issues and gay civil rights are being handled in the countries of both audiences. Whereas the USA is momentarily struggling with issues of same-sex marriage and adoption, most of the battles for gay rights have already been won in Belgium. The country has made it possible for same-sex couples to marry, to adopt children, and has legally banned all discrimination based on sexual orientation, even

though it needs to be stressed that in reality discrimination on sexual orientation still occurs. These elements of political emancipation are possibly reflected in the focus group conversations. Finally, it should be noted that the television viewers who participate were aware that the topic of discussion in the focus group was gay representation.

The focus group interviews were semi-structured, where open questions were used to instigate discussions. Aside a few introductory and general questions on gay representation, most questions were linked to several scenes that were shown to the participants. The first focus group session included fragments of *The Wire*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Torchwood*. Here, general topics on gay representation and specific themes (e.g., representing domesticity, or the role of genre in representing gay-related themes) were broached. Similarly, the second focus group session consisted of scenes from *Family Guy*, *Brothers & Sisters*, and *True Blood*, with a combination of general topics on gay representation and specific themes (e.g., stereotypes in animated genres, the potential of vampires as a subtext for gays). Here, it should be stressed that in none of the focus group interviews the concepts of heteronormativity nor resistance was introduced, nor were the interviewees informed on the potential resistance embedded within the preselected series. Yet, since the participants were asked to read the scenes, the focus group interviews consist of active readings. Because of this, this study could not inquire the way the participants negotiate the series and its gay representation in an every-day context. Hence, this study acknowledges that the focus group setting may have evoked active reading processes and resistant readings. Last, the eight focus group interviews were conducted between 25th of October 2010 and 9th of November 2010.

Finally, each focus group conversation was transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were thematically analyzed. First, the analysis of the conversations focused on how audiences read gay representations, and in particular, how they read the scenes that were considered in previous textual analyses as articulations of queer resistance. Each quote in the transcripts was given thematic labels (e.g., heteronormativity, credible representation, atypical representation, stereotypes). The labels were not predefined but emanated from the quotes. Next, the quotes were rearranged. For each preselected series, the quotes about the series were brought together, although separated by gender and sexual orientation. The same grouping method was done for the quotes that discuss television series and gay representation in general. These quotes were divided along clusters of themes that emanated from the quotes (e.g., television and genre, roles of gay representation,…). The second set of quotes was used to explore how the participants think about gay representations in general, while the first set of quotes was used to, on the one hand, illustrate the general opinions on gay representation, and on the other, to explore how the participants read resistant and heteronormative representations. With regard to the latter, this study discussed the quotes in which the resistant and/or heteronormative scenes were interpreted. These quotes were rearranged according to the types of resistant strategies that were established beforehand (i.e. queer deconstruction and queer

reconstruction). Second, the analysis inquired whether the participants assume a heteronormative or resistant discursive position in their readings. For this specific analysis, a deconstructive perspective was used. The quotes of the respondents were interpreted from a queer theoretical perspective. Those that articulate heteronormativity and/or queer resistance were withheld. These quotes were then further arranged according to its relation with the representations. Specifically, the quotes that articulate queer resistance were subdivided into quotes that support the resistant representations on screen, and quotes that question or resist heteronormative representations. Vice versa, the quotes that articulate heteronormativity were subdivided into quotes that support representations of heteronormativity, and quotes that question or resist resistant representations.

In the subsequent part, the major research results are presented and discussed. Results are illustrated with quotes from participants who were given a pseudonym to preserve anonymity. Since gender and sexual orientation are put to the front in this study, each participant is denoted with his or her gender ("M" signifying male, "F" signifying female), and his or her sexual orientation ("G" signifying the gay participants, and "H" for the heterosexual participants). In addition, the age of the participant (e.g., 25y), and the number of focus group are added to the quote (e.g., "FG2"). The first four focus groups which consisted of either gay participants or heterosexual participants are labeled "FG1" to "FG4", the four latter which consisted of both gay and heterosexual participants are labeled "FG5" to "FG8".

RESULTS

The results of the reception analysis are discussed in two major parts. The first part focuses on the way fans of contemporary television fiction read gay representation in general. In particular, it looks at how participants describe gay characters, whether they consider contemporary gay characters realistic representations of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals, and what they think to be prominent strategies in representing gay characters. Since genre is considered by the participants as a crucial element in gay representation, special attention is given to the relation between gay representation and genre. In addition, the participants' opinions on production and audiences are also elaborated on. In the second part, the study addresses queer resistance. In particular, it discusses those responses and opinions that touch upon articulations of queer resistance, but also on the opinions that stress the heteronormativity embedded in the television text. Next, it questions whether or not the participants assume a resistant or heteronormative perspective in their discussions of the television series.

1. Gay Representation

1.1. Describing Gay Characters

In the first focus group session, the participants were asked to describe the gay characters of their favorite television shows. This question was mostly intended as a comfortable introductory question, generating descriptive responses. Yet, the responses allow to focus on how the participants negotiate the element of sexual orientation into their descriptions of gay characters.

In describing gay characters, both gay and heterosexual participants are focused on the bodily articulations of the character. Not surprisingly, since television fiction is foremost a visual mode where bodies are used to co-articulate a character's identity, but bodies are also on constant display for audiences to gaze at. Hence, gay characters are predominantly discussed in terms of gender articulations, and in terms of identity traits argued to reveal a gay identity whether or not described as stereotypical or clichéd. In particular, describing a gay character as either stereotypical is the most dominant descriptive characteristic in both gay and heterosexual focus groups. As an illustration, one female heterosexual participant describes the gay characters from the American romantic dramedy series *Sex and the City* in terms of stereotypes and gender:

> *Yannah (FG1, H, F, 22y): Yeah, that show has a few gays, but mostly side characters. They are the best friends of, and they are depicted by horrible clichés, very feminine.… The series also only features gay males, no lesbians.*

Next to bodily articulations, some participants describe a gay character in terms of narration and character development. For instance, whether or not the gay character functions as a main or side character, if he or she is an outsider in the narrative, or whether or not the character is defined as either explicitly gay or not. Yet, aspects of character development are mostly discussed by the gay participants, foremost pointing at how the character may or may not be represented as struggling with his or her gay identity.

These ways of describing are also present in later discussions that were centered around a specific scene or series. Specifically, the participants were asked to describe the gay representation of three characters, namely Omar Little (*The Wire*), Kima Greggs (*The Wire*), and Lafayette Reynolds (*True Blood*). With regard to *The Wire*, the participants were first asked to describe the criminal character Omar Little (see figure 1). Most respondents describe him as an atypical gay male character. His articulations of physical masculinity and his criminal identity are being referred to as elements that make Omar diverge from the dominant representation of a gay male character. It should be noted that those who consider Omar atypical are mostly heterosexual participants, whereas the gay participants rather speak of Omar as a character that diversifies the gay spectrum, who is not only represented as tough, but also as tender and gentle, for instance in his relationship with his boyfriend Dante. Even though his performance of gender is the element most used to describe Omar (8 heterosexual and 11 gay participants), his black identity is also touched upon by a few participants. Yet, only two participants (both gay male participants) discuss Omar's ethnicity in relation to his sexual identity. Both point out the interesting perspective in having a gay character who is also part of a black macho subculture. Further, some participants consider his articulation of masculinity to stem from the criminal milieu he lives in, and do not find it necessary to link it to his gay identity nor his black identity per se, as for instance Joke stresses:

> Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y): I think him being tough, yes, at first sight, that it may be considered typical for an Afro-American subculture, but in this series him being tough fits, since it is the culture from the street. It thus makes sense, him performing a street identity, and I'm sure this has nothing to do with him putting on a façade to hide his homosexuality.

Her account of Omar compares to the way Omar is regarded by some as a strong character who is proud of who he is. Finally, some participants praise the representation of Omar's sexual identity as a given that does not dominate his total identity.

Remarkably, whereas there is a major conformity among the participants in describing Omar as a diverse and strong gay character, there is less agreement on detective Kima Greggs (see figure 2). With Kima, the main discussion is whether or not she is represented as a stereotypical lesbian. Some heterosexual participants find Kima to be represented as a stereotypical butch, while some other participants (both heterosexual and gay participants) think differently. Within the debate on Kima, the

FIGURE 1   *Omar Little (front) and his partner Dante (background) (*The Wire*, US, 2003)*

main argument is centered around gender. For the first participants, Kima is considered to embody the traditional image of a lesbian who mostly performs masculinity. Ulrike (FG3, H, F, 32y) highlights how this gendered pattern is not only reflected in Kima's physical image, but also in her relationship with her partner Cheryl, in which Kima performs masculine gender roles and Cheryl feminine gender roles. As with Omar, a few participants link her masculine behavior to ethnicity rather than her sexual orientation. However, most participants (5 heterosexual and 4 gay participants) link it to her work identity, arguing that the performance of masculinity comes with the job. Among these participants, two heterosexual participants consider it a shame that Kima performs her masculine work identity also at home. However, the gay participants disagree with considering Kima a stereotypical butch character. Most of them point out how Kima plays with gender roles, and two of them stress that Kima's gay identity is not emphasized through gender, and certainly not in scenes that depict Kima in her work environment. Finally, two gay participants describe Kima as a model for the gay community. While one of them praises her human capacities, the other praises her representation as a nuanced articulation of queerness:

> Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y): Yeah, I think Kima is good advertising, to say it like this, for gays, since she shows that we're not all either black or white, that when we're lesbians we're not by definition butches, or when we're homosexuals we're not all effeminate,...it's not that we're playing with it, but we're all a bit feminine and a bit masculine…

FIGURE 2   *Kima Greggs (*The Wire*, US, 2003)*

Finally, participants were invited to describe *True Blood*'s Lafayette Reynolds (see figure 3). Again, gender is the dominant identity marker to discuss a gay character[xii]. Most participants (both heterosexual and gay participants) rely on gender to reflect on Lafayette. Many of them accentuate that Lafayette plays with gender, how he embodies stereotypical feminine traits while also subverts them via performances of masculinity. The participants point out his flamboyant outfits, his use of make-up and confront these with his strength, anger, and his ability to easily win a fight with hillbillies. His strength is also put in relation to his ability to care about his family and people, aspects that participants consider as opposed to one another. Most participants clarify their likeability by his ability to surprise, and to unite seemingly contradictory identity traits. Since the scene that was shown features Lafayette wearing a kilt, some responses on gender focus on this specific part of his outfit. Sien (FG6, G, F, 26y) argues that him wearing a kilt shows how the character is at ease with his identity, while two gay female participants agree with one another on how the kilt represents Lafayette. They consider the kilt to be both a skirt as a symbol of the sturdy Scotsman, a piece of clothing that unites femininity and masculinity. Last, and aside from gender, some participants point out how he does not define his own sexual identity. Cindy (FG8, H, F, 25y) considers this an explanation why he seems to be able to turn on almost everyone, including a straight redneck customers, which she explains by the fact that he just radiates sex.

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FIGURE 3   *Figure 3Lafayette Reynolds (*True Blood*, US, 2008)*

1.2. Gay Representations and the Real World

Next to describing gay characters, the participants were asked to compare the gay representations with gays, lesbians, or bisexuals they know, or with their perceptions of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals in general. Again, this question was first asked as an introductory question in the first focus group session before discussing specific series. However, whereas the question was descriptive, this specific question asked participants to make active comparisons between a television reality and their daily realities. In addition, the sexual orientation of the participants is considered decisive in answering this question, since the gay participants are able to identify with the gay sexual identity of the characters, and are socially and culturally potentially more embedded in gay (sub)cultures which eases making comparisons. Therefore, the responses of the heterosexual participants are discussed separately from those of the gay participants.

Within the group of heterosexual participants, several participants consider the gay characters realistic. A few participants argue that contemporary gay representations are characterized by a diversity that resembles the diversity in heterosexual representations. This ties with the remark of three other participants who consider it representative to see gay characters whose sexuality is

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accentuated, and gay characters whose sexuality is not stressed. With regard to the latter remark, two participants find gay characters realistic when they are represented as normal, implying their sexual identity is not articulated onto their bodies. A few participants stretch the link between being "normal" and looking like a heterosexual. Benjamin for instance makes this connection, while talking about gay character Oskar on mockumentary series *The Office USA*:

> *Benjamin (FG3, H, M, 20y): It is his environment that stresses it [his sexuality] or jokes about it, but as viewer you do not notice anything about him, you are not on to the fact that he is gay.*

In addition, two participants argue that a realistic gay representation uses the gay identity as one aspect of the character, rather than making it the only identity trait. Finally, Marieke (F1, H, F, 24y) finds it realistic that a gay character is depicted as going through a struggle, a quest for his or her identity.

On the other hand, some participants disagree with the realism of gay representations. One disagrees with the gay diversity on television, implied by other participants, and argues that gays are more diverse in reality, in contrast to the generalization of certain clichés. Likewise, Korneel (FG1, H, M, 25y) considers certain gay characters being exaggerated. Next, Laurie (FG3, H, F, 28y) who has talked about the drama series *The L Word* cannot believe that a world with only women represents reality. Finally, Pieter (F1, H, M, 26y) experienced difficulties identifying with the gay characters, in particular with the gay male characters from *Six Feet Under*. He does not formulate having an issue with the fact that the characters were gay, but rather with the fact that their bodies are fully trained and therefore difficult to identify with.

Within the group of gay participants, most participants consider the gay representation they had seen in television fiction to be realistic. Specifically, four participants point out that the gay diversity in real life is being represented on the screen, and two other participants back this up by stressing that there are gay characters on screen who articulate their sexual identity and gay characters who do not. With regard to stereotypes, three participants stress that the representation of stereotypes and clichés are mostly nothing more than a reflection of a reality where gays who embody these "stereotypes" are no less real than those who do not. Next to the representation of the gay community as diverse, the participants point out the individual diversity of a gay character. Two participants stress the realism in representing a gay character whose private identity articulations differ from their public identity articulations, while another considers it important to represent a gay sexual identity as just an identity trait of a character. Last, Steven (FG2, G, M, 28y) points out the representation of a gay character going through an identity struggle as a realistic representation of a gay character's development, while also comparing it to his own experiences.

In contrast, some participants consider gay representations not to be realistic in some situations. Two of them point out the lack of identification possibilities when a gay character has a different social and cultural background. For instance, Veerle (FG4, G, F, 27y) considers Omar on *The Wire* to be too tough to be realistic, while Jan considers Lafayette on *True Blood* not realistic because Lafayette rather embodies an attractive and idealized image of identity:

> *Jan (FG2, G, M, 24y): His attractiveness does not come from being a realistic representation, but rather comes from his resemblance to a modern idealized image of what identity should be, something that can be fluently and flexibly reassembled, which he is able to do. I think that in reality few people are as free and flexible with identity as he is.*

Generally, in each focus group, the gay representations are considered realistic. In both the heterosexual and gay focus groups, most of the participants consider the diversity of the gay community to be represented on the small screen. Likewise, they both stress the variations in gay visibility as representative. Their opinions differ with regard to the representation of stereotypes. Where one heterosexual participant rebukes the generalization of clichés, three gay participants stress stereotypical gays as representative. Furthermore, a few differences are spotted that can be linked to the sexual orientation of the participant. In the heterosexual focus groups, it can be argued that the perspective of being a heterosexual is being taken into account to describe the representations in relation to heterosexuals. In the focus groups with gay participants, one's own gay perspective is being used a few times to stress the importance of identification. Yet, one heterosexual participant does not rule out the possibility of identifying with a gay character. Finally, the gay participants hint at a conceptualization of a queer identity as something that can be performed, and that can be played with.

1.3. Strategies of Gay Representation

Throughout both focus group sessions, participants were asked to express opinions about the representations of gay characters. Often, the participants discuss these representations by formulating or touching upon a specific mode of representation, which can be considered here as a representational strategy. Within these paragraphs, the different strategies of representations are enlisted that the participants touched upon or hinted at.

1.3.1. Gay Iconography

A strategy often quoted by the participants is the strategy of gay iconography. This refers to certain articulations, whether it is through the body of the actor or within the narrative, that function as hints, clues, or traits that connote the character as potentially gay. Several gay participants argue

that they become triggered when certain female or male characters perform these gay iconic articulations:

> *Sien (FG2, G, F, 26y): When I am looking at television series, and I see characters with certain traits, like Starbuck in Battlestar Galactica, or Debra in Dexter, I have a difficult time in letting go the idea that they might be gay. Because, if they would turn out gay, that would be awesome, since I love Starbuck, and I love Debra, and then you would like them the way you would like them best.*

In regard to the reading of iconic elements of gayness, the case of Omar Little (*The Wire*) is quite interesting. Several gay and heterosexual participants postulate that they were surprised to find out that Omar is gay. Two female gay participants point out that Omar articulates masculinity and sturdiness which, for them, connotes a heterosexual identity. However, the participants stress the difference between iconic gay traits and gay clichés. Alexander (FG7, G, M, 27y) for instance underscores the necessity of depicting gay characters who articulate a little bit of gayness to show the difference between gays and heterosexuals. His argument is built upon the heteronormative representation of the gay male couple in *Brothers & Sisters* and their marriage (see figure 4). For him, it seems that the couple is "acting heteronormative to pass as legitimate within the context of the series". He asks himself why the typical identity traits that signify a gay identity have to be erased, and why gays have to be represented as either normalized or heavily stereotyped.

FIGURE 4 *Scotty Wandell and Kevin Walker getting married (*Brothers & Sisters*, US, 2008)*

1.3.2. Gay as Stereotypical / Gay as Diverse

One of the most discussed elements within both focus group sessions is the use of stereotypes within television series. Even though most participants seem to agree that contemporary television fiction is marked with a more diverse representation of gays, there are some participants that point out the presence of gay stereotypes on television. The most quoted stereotype was the gender role reversal, where a gay man is depicted as effeminate, and a lesbian as butch. Steven (FG2, G, M, 28y) adds that often these effeminate men practice a feminine profession, such as hairdresser or fashion designer, while lesbians are depicted in aggressive professions. A second stereotype that is hailed by some is the depiction of promiscuity among gay men. With regard to the narrative plotline of gay men considering a three-way on for instance *Brothers & Sisters* and *Six Feet Under*, Hasan compares the representation of gays with the representation of migrant men and women:

> *Hasan (FG7, H, M, 31y): It may be possible that the three-way eventually does not take place, but it seems that the theme of promiscuity needs to be at least discussed. It's like when people talk about migrant men and woman, the subject of Islam is somehow present and waiting to be touched upon.*

Nicolas (FG2, G, M, 32y) shares this complaint when he argues that gay men have not often been represented according to the more traditional way of living, or associated with family values. In contrast, Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y) points out that lesbians are mostly being represented cocooning, and considers lesbian domesticity a stereotype. Besides, it needs to be stressed that stereotypes in itself are not per se dismissed or questioned in the focus group sessions. Foremost, the participants highlight that much depends on the context in which stereotypes are applied. Hence, when discussing the stereotypes that are used in the animated series *Family Guy*, none of the participants finds them offensive or inappropriate. Instead, the stereotypes are considered funny and inherent to the way the genre functions. None obliges to the way most gay and heterosexual participants consider the stereotypes as rather highlighting gay clichés and absurdities than being homophobic or hurtful (see also § 1.4).

Nonetheless, many participants accentuate the diversity of gay representations on the small screen. According to Korneel (FG1, H, M, 25y), gay representations are not dominated by one single stereotype. Three other gay participants applaud the fact that gay representations are no longer depicted in stark contrasts. They point at the diversity between the different gay characters in contemporary television fiction, and highlight the nuanced representation. Also, a few gay participants stress that gays represented by stereotypes are also lifelike representations of gay men and women who embody these stereotypes, and who are part of the diverse gay community. However, it needs to be added that several participants argue that what is still lacking is the representation of a nuanced lesbian character. In addition, two other participants argue that the

representation of a bisexual character is also missing. Finally, Hasan (FG7, H, M, 31y) highlights the complete invisibility of transgender identities (see also § 1.8).

1.3.3. Gay as Side Character / Gay as Hero

With regard to narrative positions, a few questions were asked with regard to the role of a gay character in the storylines of the series. Specifically, these questions inquired whether the character functions as a side or main character, and whether the main character could be considered a hero or not. Many participants argue that gays in general are not often depicted as main characters. Yannah (F1, H, F, 22y) specifies this by describing the gay characters as distant characters. What is also missed is the gay hero. Though this conclusion was made after showing a scene from *Torchwood*, which is in fact a science fiction series that features a gay hero, most participants argue that they could not recall any other example of a gay hero in a fantasy or action series. Two gay participants refer to Xena, the female heroin of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, a series that has often been suggested to have a gay subtext. Some other participants refer to Willow on *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. However, Jonathan (FG4, G, M, 26y) argues that Willow functions as a side-kick to the heterosexual heroin Buffy, an argument that affirms the secondary role of the gay characters on television series. When asked why gay heroes are mostly invisible on the small screen, some participants (both heterosexual and gay participants) argue that the fantasy and action genres do not leave much room for gay-related issues. They describe it as masculine genres, where the content is masculine and the target audiences as well. However, whereas the heterosexual participants mostly call it masculine genres, Michaël (FG4, G, M, 26y) specifies the target audience as both masculine and heterosexual. As for the concept of hero, Sandrine (FG1, G, F, 22y) argues that the concept itself connotes toughness which is an identity trait rather associated with heterosexuality, whereas homosexuality is rather associated with soft identity traits. Sven (FG2, G, M, 22y) agrees with her interpretation, and assumes that target audiences may not consider it credible to see a gay hero since he may be read as too weak to be heroic (see also § 1.4, § 1.5 and § 1.6).

However, it must be noted that not all participants agree on a total lack of main or heroic gay characters on the small screen. When Kristof (FG2, G, M, 25y) argues that it is not yet possible to represent a gay character as main character in mainstream television series, Steven (FG2, G, M, 28y) points out that it is nonetheless possible in comedy series. Also, Benjamin (FG3, H, M, 20y) stresses the fact that *Torchwood* should be recognized as a series that has a gay main hero, and reads into the representation of Captain Jack a mocking of the presumption that superheroes cannot be gay without making a big issue out of it (see figure 5).

FIGURE 5   *Captain Jack Harkness (*Torchwood*, UK, 2007)*

1.3.4. Gay as an Issue / Gay as a Non-issue

Kristof (FG2, G, M, 25y) also underscores how a gay sexual identity is often represented as an issue. For him, mainstream series have not yet succeeded in portraying a character who just happens to be gay. However, Steven (FG5, G, M, 28y) disagrees, and argues that in mainstream television too little attention is paid to the daily reality in which a gay man or woman is being reprimanded for his or her sexual identity. He implies that more attention should be paid to the issues that come with being gay.

1.3.5. Gay as an Asexual Identity / Gay as a Sexual Identity

Further, some participants point out how gays are sometimes being represented as asexual human beings. Yannah (FG1, H, F, 22y) points out how, for instance, the depiction of a same-sex intimacy in *The Wire* is more explicit than in most series. This corresponds to how Steven (FG2, G, M, 28y) points out the total lack of same-sex intimacy in *Will & Grace*, a sitcom nonetheless centered on the friendship between a gay man and a heterosexual woman. Yet, the same participant also argues that in other series too much attention goes to sex and postulates that a gay identity entails more than sex.

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Particularly, she refers to the Flemish soap operas entitled *Familie* (Family) and *Thuis* (Home), soaps that are intended to reflect a reality that is familiar for many Flemish men and women.

1.3.6. Gay as Straight / Gay as Queer

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that most participants discuss the representation of gay characters in relation to heterosexual characters. In some of the previous strategies, this is already touched upon with regard to for instance the concept of a gay hero. Briefly stated, some participants (both heterosexual and gay participants) discuss the representations of gay characters in terms of being normal, and explicitly or implicitly suggest that normal should be interpreted as heterosexual. On the other, there are gay participants who discuss gay characters in terms of queerness, and where queer needs to be understood as diverging from the heteronormal. However, since these representational strategies are strongly tied to the discussion of resistance and the reiteration of heteronormativity, they will be elaborately discussed later (see § 2).

1.4. Gay Representation and Genre

Many comments on gay representation are tied to aspects of genre. Hence, this section looks into the way participants interpret this relation between genre and gay representation. Once more, stereotypes are the most common element to talk about. The participants agree that gay stereotypes are used most in the genre of comedy. Three participants explain that the genre depends upon exaggeration of its characters to be funny, as well as playing with the clichés. A few participants accentuate that this is mostly significant for the comic animation series. However, whereas stereotypes are considered harmless in comedy, they can become problematic in other genres. For instance, Marieke (FG5, H, F, 24y) stresses that stereotypes are not an issue when used in comedy genres, but argues that this may not be the case in soap operas. According to her, these soaps are often assumed to represent reality and fears that stereotyped gays may produce an unjust image, especially when these characters are articulated through clichés and other characters are not.[xiii] Sandrine (FG6, G, F, 22y) agrees with her postulation that context is important for reading the stereotypes (see also § 1.3). In addition, Tim (FG8, H, M, 23y) stresses that comedy genres depend on stereotypes for its audiences to quickly read a certain character as for instance gay. Last, Pieter (FG6, H, M, 26y) wonders if it will once be possible to create a comedy series that features a gay character in which his or her gay identity does not serve as a constant pun.

In relation to this, the participants were also presented with a proposition, and asked whether they agreed with it. The proposition states that laughing with gays is homophobic. Twelve participants (6 heterosexual and 6 gay participants) disagree strongly with the proposition. Five other participants (3 heterosexual and 2 gay participants) disagree as well but show an understanding for those who would state such a proposition. In none of the four focus groups of the second session, the proposition is supported. The participants who strongly disagree with the proposition point out the

following arguments. First, two gay and two heterosexual participants argue that stereotypes may occur and may be over the top, but that they equally expose how homophobia functions. For instance, Kristof argues that the stereotypes in *Family Guy* are used to mock stereotypes:

> Kristof (FG8, G, M, 25y): It is very typical, and present in almost every scene. You see that the series is not made by people who believe in these stereotypes, certainly not for this show. Here, they use them to poke fun at the stereotypes. I think this determines whether or not you take offence at them or not.

Second, four gay participants accentuate that laughing with gays should be considered a good thing. Not being able to laugh with something is considered much worse. Further, it is being argued that many jokes rely on stereotypes without having a homophobic intent to it. This ties in with the reaction of some participants to highlight the genre of comedy as depending upon stereotypes for its humor. Further, two heterosexual participants stress that in many comedy series, each character is being laughed with, not only the gay characters. In addition, two participants assume that one who makes such a statement lacks self-mockery. Finally, Ulrike (FG5, H, F, 32y) rebukes the proposition to lack nuance, while Michaël (FG6, G, M, 26y) considers the proposition to stem from a perspective of over-discrimination, which makes it impossible to laugh with anything.

The five participants who personally disagree with the proposition but who could understand the proposition makers, mainly argue that what it is not being taken into account is the perspective of the audiences. For instance, Cindy implies the importance of the audiences' personal, social and cultural background in reading stereotypes:

> Cindy (FG8, H, F, 25y): Genuine homophobic people will find these stereotypes also funny, but in a different way than people who aren't homophobic.

They imply that stereotypes and clichés will allow to either be read as a confirmation of their prejudices, while others will more quickly read the irony in the representations of gay stereotypes.

Finally, genre is considered an important factor whether or not gay characters are represented. Both heterosexual and gay participants point out that more masculine genres such as action, science fiction, and fantasy will portray few gay characters in contrast to drama and comedy genres. For instance, Cindy (FG3, H, F, 25y) argues that drama is engaged with representing reality, and considers it therefore logical that gay characters are being represented. Yet, Korneel (FG1, H, M, 25y) stresses that science fiction should not be an obstacle to include gay characters.

1.5. Production of Gay Representation

Even though, during the conversations, the main focus was on television series as texts on their own, some questions were asked about the participants' opinions on the production of the specific series, specifically in relation to gay representation. Even though many opinions on production include opinions on audiences as well, aspects of audiences will be discussed separately in the next part.

The first group of opinions concern the intentions of the producers and series creators. Within the focus group sessions, four major categories of potential intentions have been formulated, each tied to the aspect of gay representation. First, certain series are created to target a major audience. This is indicated mostly by gay participants. They point out that the common denominator of television audiences is a heterosexual television viewer. A few gay participants assume that heterosexual audiences will only be able to identify with a heterosexual main character, hence the assumption that producers do not create gay main characters. For Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y), the reason is rather that television reality is intended to represent our daily reality, in which gays are also a minority. When talking about mainstream series that do feature a gay main character, such as *Will & Grace*, Kristof (FG8, G, M, 25y) argues that such series are nevertheless created for a heterosexual audience. Two gay participants also point out the consideration producers probably make in whether they want to be labeled as a gay series because of having gay main characters. Both participants think there will be a probable decline in audiences if a series becomes labeled as a gay series (see also § 1.6). Second, a series may intent on expressing social and emancipating opinions. With regard to gay-related issues, two gay participants refer to *Queer As Folk*, a drama series that revolves around a group of gay men, as a series with a clear gay message. They argue that the series intends to tell its audiences that one should not hide his or her gay identity, that one should celebrate his or her gay identity and that heteronormative behavior of gays often gets punished. Yet, not every participant agrees. A few argue that the intention of series creators is to bring entertainment, and they consider that the producers have no emancipating or social intentions:

> Dirk (FG7, G, M, 25y): I don't think it's the intention of the television makers. I also don't think we need to go looking for profound messages or intentions. They just make a television series, they rely briefly on some colored themes. I don't think it's their intention of breaking a lance for the gay community. At least, it does not look like that.

Third, a few participants stress that the intention of series is to laugh with gay stereotypes. They argue that stereotypes are used as a source of humor. Some point out that they may be intended as a critique on the way stereotypes function, but Hendrik (FG5, H, M, 27y) wonders if this critique is intended. He agrees that this critique may be read in the representations, but doubts to consider the intentionality of using clichés to let audiences reflect on them. Finally, some participants stress that the logics of television realities do not necessarily correspond to an everyday reality. Several of them

stress the logics of television, often defined by genre (e.g., a gay participant refers to the soap conventions in *Brothers & Sisters*) or the characteristics of a specific series. With regard to the latter, two gay participants argue that the choices made in certain series are often motivated by a narrative and cinematographic consideration rather than a realistic consideration. They formulate their argument in relation to the scene from *Six Feet Under* shown in the first focus group session. The scene depicts a social worker visiting the series' main gay couple David Fisher and Keith Charles to see if they could be suitable legal guardians of Keith's little niece Taylor (see figure 6). In contrast to the heteronormative social worker they were expecting, the man turns out to be gay. It is this reversal that the two participants point at and interpret as a comic narrative intervention rather than an intention to represent reality. They argue that it would have been a stronger message if it was a heterosexual social worker who granted the gay couple legal guardian rights, but think the producers chose instead for a comic relief through a reversal of expectations.

FIGURE 6   *David Fisher, Keith Charles, and Taylor (*Six Feet Under*, US, 2002)*

The second group of opinions elaborate on the cinematographic and narrative choices that have been made by the producers or series creators. Some participants hail the importance of the production context of the television series, which in most cases is the United States of America. For several participants, this context seems part of the explanation why there are so few gay main characters. Laurie (FG3, H, F, 28y) assumes that in the USA gay-related issues are still, to a certain

extent, taboo. Ulrike (FG3, H, F, 32y) compares this context to a Western European context, and argues that a gay hero would be more likely in a European context. She not only refers to Captain Jack of *Torchwood*, but as well to the gay-coded Sherlock Holmes in the BBC series *Sherlock*. She also points out the differences within the context of USA, arguing that a cable channel like HBO is less confined than a public network like ABC, which she perceives as a well-behaving channel. In addition, Hendrik (FG1, H, M, 27y) points out how narrative and cinematographic choices decide how a gay character is portrayed. For him, this context makes him read televised characters differently than people in everyday life, and allows him to consider the presence of certain identity traits (e.g., a female character who behaves masculine) to aid the television viewer to read the character as potentially gay. Some other participants formulate a similar opinion, foremost in relation to the use of stereotypes in comedy genres to represent a character as gay.

Finally, some remarks have been made about the quality of the representation of gay characters. Mostly gay participants stress the incredibility of certain performances of gay characters, and in particular of same-sex intimacy. For instance, the participants were shown fragments of *The Wire* and *Brothers & Sisters* that include a scene with a same-sex kiss. For some gay participants, the kisses are not convincing. Karen (FG7, H, F, 29y) argues that these series are presumably made by a heterosexual team, and suggests that for a more credible representation of gays and gayness, gay scenarists or gay directors are needed.

1.6. Audiences of Gay Representation

Next to expressing opinions on production, the participants have talked about audiences. When doing so, they have mostly discussed hypothetical audiences, but also spoke on behalf of audiences they consider themselves member of.

First of all, it should be stressed that many participants speak of audiences as diverse entities, where each individual reads television content from a different perspective. This brings forth that the reading of, for instance, the representation of gay stereotypes in adult animated sitcoms will differ among television viewers. Several gay and heterosexual participants point out that homophobic people will read the jokes that use stereotypes from a homophobic perspective. For instance, Steven argues that he and his peers feel able to sidestep the stereotypes, but doubts if other viewers can do the same when a certain stereotype is reiterated on television:

> *Steven (FG5, G, M, 28y): I wonder when teenagers see these stereotypes, and I mean in particular heterosexual teenage boys, if they get it, or if they just laugh with the superficial layer of the television series. I consider this somehow a shame, since it takes a practiced television viewer to see that those are clichés, that they are used for humor, the way we see it. I know how to laugh with that, because I know that in fifty percent of the cases gays*

are not like that, and I know to laugh with that because of other reasons, but not everyone will, and in a way, I find that a shame. But it will probably always be like that.

Karen (FG1, H, F, 29y) agrees and illustrates her argument by pointing out how the image of a masculine woman is mostly interpreted as a lesbian, instead of considering it to be a woman who is masculine and heterosexual. A similar discussion is conducted on the representation of gay men having a three-way on *Six Feet Under*, or considering a three-way on *Brothers & Sisters*. With regard to the first three-way, two gay female participants stress that for some audiences this representation would be a confirmation of their prejudice of gay men being promiscuous. With regard to the way both series depict the idea of a three-way as something that is not evident, some participants (both gay and heterosexual participants) applaud the representations for showing audiences that these transgressive sexual acts are not taken for granted within the gay community. Further, the participants not only point out the difference between audiences on moral stances, but also assume a difference between heterosexual and gay participants. For instance, Alexander (FG4, G, M, 27y) elaborates on this difference when discussing a specific scene from *The Wire*, in which a parallel montage is used to compare the evening dinner in a heterosexual and gay household. He argues that the accentuation of the similarities may be intended for heterosexual audiences to show the similarities between gays and heterosexuals, where gays consider these similarities obvious. Finally, some heterosexual and gay participants highlight the different social and cultural contexts of the series that not only mark the production context, but as well the context of audience. Since most of these series are primarily produced for national audiences, the television content will reflect the national context. For instance, the same-sex wedding scene in *Brothers & Sisters* is considered by most participants to be represented as normal, and is being supported by some participants for that matter. However, some participants read into this normalization also a confirmation of heteronormativity and rebuke the representation for doing so (see also § 2.3.2). Both arguments rely on a conceptualization of the series' target audience as primarily American and assumed to be in need of representations that assure the audience that gays are normal:

> Hendrik (FG5, H, M, 27y): This is exactly what you would expect of such an American series. The fact that the family comes together at the end of every episode fits into the bigger picture. That is why it's a good thing to represent this couple as normal. As such, the average American can see that this can be normal as well, that they [gays] can also fit into the picture.

Next, some gay participants point out the role of intertextuality when reading gay representations. This fits in with the argument of taking a television viewer's perspective into account, but highlights the specific knowledge an audience may have of the actor, director, etc. For instance, three female gay participants refer to the main gay hero of *Torchwood*, Captain Jack, who is performed by out and proud actor John Barrowman. Another example is how some television viewers who are familiar with

Six Feet Under read the main character of *Dexter* as potentially gay, because the character is performed by Michael C. Hall who played gay character David Fisher on *Six Feet Under*.

Further, and as argued before (see § 1.5), television series are considered to target a major audience. Among their arguments, they consider that the biggest audience is by definition heterosexual, and that identification is assumed to be easier through heterosexual than gay main characters. In addition, Steven (FG5, G, M, 28y) argues that gay audiences are much more able to identify with heterosexual characters. With regard to series with main gay characters, two participants also argue that they are quickly labeled as gay series, which is assumed to reduce potential audiences. Dirk (FG4, G, M, 25y) assumes that series with gay male characters only attract gay men and heterosexual women. However, not everyone agrees. Nicolas (FG2, G, M, 32y) disagrees with the assumption that every gay will watch a series because it features a gay character, and Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y) points out how *The L Word* also attracts heterosexual men and women.

Next, and also discussed before (see § 1.5), Hendrik (FG1, H, M, 27y) stresses that the reality created in series is being read differently than the way daily realities are read. He argues that certain iconic and stereotypical traits are being used to articulate a character as gay, and that these cues will be interpreted much quicker as gay when someone on television is articulating these cues. As an illustration, he reasons that a masculine woman on television will rather be read as a lesbian on the small screen than in reality.

Finally, four heterosexual participants stress that they did not give it a moment's thought, the way gays are being represented on the small screen. Two of them argue that they only become aware of it when the gay representations are made explicit. Cindy (FG8, H, F, 25y) also ties it to the role of television series which she defines as foremost a source of entertainment, an opinion that is shared by some other participants (1 heterosexual and 2 gay participants) (see § 1.7). Last, Hasan (FG7, H, M, 31y) wonders how much audiences read into these representations, and doubts that television viewers are deeply engaged with uncovering subtextual meanings.

1.7. Roles of Gay Representation

During the focus group conversations, some participants have expressed their opinions on the potential role of gay representations. On the one hand, there are those who argue that television's major role is entertainment, and do not imagine a specific role for gay representation. On the other hand, some participants imply or stress that gay representations can have a social and emancipating role.

1.7.1. Entertainment

In response to a few questions that inquired, on the one hand, how the participants read specific gay representations and, on the other, the critical and emancipating potential of television series, some heterosexual and gay participants remark that they doubt that television series are intended to change anything. They all stress that television series are primarily a source of entertainment. Cindy (FG8, H, F, 25y) doubts that one can learn anything from television, and Pieter (FG6, H, M, 26y) argues that he watches television series because he wants to be entertained instead of being confronted with a message. In addition, three gay participants doubt the emancipating potential of television series for the gay community. For instance, a few participants argue that the use of stereotypes in *Family Guy* is not considered to evoke change (see figure 7). Those who do not see the irony in the representation of the stereotypes will read them as confirmations of their prejudices. Dirk (FG7, G, M, 25y), for instance, states not to see the emancipating potential of *Family Guy*'s mocking of gay stereotypes. He also stresses that these series laugh with anything, and therefore does not read the use of gay stereotypes as embedding a critical message.

FIGURE 7   *Peter Griffin has become a gay man (*Family Guy*, US, 2009)*

1.7.2. Social and Emancipating Role

In contrast, many participants ascribe, at least to some extent, a social or emancipating role to television series and to gay representation. A first role that is being discussed is the way television series are raising awareness of gays and gay-related themes. Two heterosexual male participants consider it important to broach gay subjects instead of ignoring it. Hasan (FG7, H, M, 31y) argues that it might lead to a dialogue among television viewers, for instance children and their parents talking about gay issues after watching an episode of *South Park* or *Family Guy*. Similarly, some participants point out the benefits of representing gay issues before a major audience. Two participants, for instance, support the representation of gay domesticities to illustrate the normality of it. Steven (FG2, G, M, 28y) also stresses that these representations are able to say to its audiences that gays "look just like the audiences", which Steven thus assumes to be heterosexual.

Second, a few participants highlight the role of television series in emancipating gays. They argue that series are not only broaching touchy subjects but can be considered able to change the social and cultural situation for gays. Even though some participants have questioned the direct emancipating potential of gay representations on television, a few attribute emancipating potential to specific gay representations. For instance, Ulrike (FG5, H, F, 32y) praises the representation of a same-sex wedding in *Brothers & Sisters* as potentially helpful in changing the general attitude toward gays. Besides, Kristof (FG8, G, M, 25y) argues that gay representation cannot lead to direct emancipation, but stresses that it does broach gay subjects.

Next, one gay and two heterosexual participants point at the series' potential for social criticism. They argue that certain gay representations may criticize the way gays and minorities in general are being treated in society. Hendrik illustrates this by elaborating on *Family Guy*'s critical potential:

> Hendrik (FG5, H, M, 27y): Yes, I agree that in animated series they often use stereotypes, and that they use them in a proper way. I agree that it's a way to express criticism, but it's also possible to just laugh with it. You do not always have to see what is being stereotyped to laugh with it. But if you look a bit more closely, you will always find some sort of criticism of the American society in Family Guy. That's why I like these kind of series.

In addition, Ulrike (FG5, H, F, 32y) argues that these series may reveal the presence of homophobia by using humor and stereotypes.

A fourth role that is being ascribed to series, and in particular to gay representation, is its potential for identification. Six gay participants tell that they relate with gay characters, and use gay representations as means of identification. For instance, Sven illustrates why gay characters in television series have been important for him:

> *Sven (FG2, G, M, 22y): In my teenage years, Degrassi: The Next Generation was being broadcasted, and that show featured a young gay boy. And I wanted to watch every evening to see what happened next, and to compare it with my own life. And if I ask peers if they saw that too, they say "Yeah, me too!". The same with Dawson's Creek, and only because it featured a gay guy.*

Next to Sven, Steven (FG2, G, M, 28y) points out how gay character Jack on *Dawson's Creek* has helped him growing up as gay. The role of identification is also underscored by a few other gay participants who stress the necessity of a diverse representation of gay characters to keep it possible for gay audiences to identify with the characters on screen. Last, Magalie (FG4, G, F, 25y) says she started to relate more to Omar Little on *The Wire* the moment she found out he was gay, and thinks this might be related to herself being gay. In addition, her response implies that gay identification can be cross-gender.

Finally, some specific remarks have been made about the role of television in confirming gay stereotypes. Marieke (FG5, H, F, 24y) thinks that television series confirm certain prejudices on gays, for instance that gays are by definition promiscuous when television series show gays having three-ways (see also § 1.6). Two other gay participants agree with her by pointing out that some television viewers are able to decode the representations as stereotypes, while others cannot. Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y) agrees that the reading of stereotypes depends upon the background of audiences, but stresses that these stereotypes can be realistic representations. Also, two gay female participants question whether television series are either confirming or challenging these stereotypes by using them. In addition, two gay participants wonder if the mocking of these stereotypes could be interpreted as a mocking of those who embody these stereotypes in reality. Finally, Benjamin (FG3, H, M, 20y) is convinced that television series may challenge stereotypes. He for instance suggests that the image of a superhero as heterosexual can be challenged by depicting a gay superhero, which he illustrates with *Torchwood*'s Captain Jack.

1.8. Groundbreaking Gay Characters

At the end of the second focus group session, the participants were invited to think about what kind of gay representation in television fiction they would consider to break new ground. A first group of suggestions concerns the spectrum of gay and queer identities. Joke (FG7, G, F, 32y) and Laurie (FG8, H, F, 28y) suggest the necessity of a "nuanced lesbian", a female gay character who is not depicted as either a lipstick lesbian or a butch. Steven (FG5, G, M, 28y) also stresses the inclusion of a masculine gay main character. In addition, the lack of bisexual and transgender characters in mainstream television fiction is mentioned. A second group of suggestions concerns the construction of gay identities that intersect with other identity traits, such as religion, and ethnicity. Two

heterosexual participants suggest an inclusion of gay desire in either a monastery or convent. With regard to ethnicity, Hasan (FG7, H, M, 31y) suggests the creation of a migrant gay character without the inclusion of a narrative angle on terrorism or religion. Also, some suggestions were made to include a gay character in a role that is almost always interpreted as heterosexual. These suggestions include a gay quarterback, a gay action hero, a gay Disney character, some more gay bad guys, a gay president of the United States of America, and a gay housewife. Finally, Ilse (FG6, H, F, 30y) stresses the difficulty of this question, since she has never before thought about it.

2. Queer Resistance

In this second part, the discussion of the results of the reception analysis focus on the readings of gay representations from a queer theoretical perspective. First, this part examines how the potential articulations of queer resistance within popular television series are read by the focus group participants. Second, it inquires whether or not the participants assume a heteronormative or resistant discursive position in their readings of gay representations. To this end, the focus group participants were asked to discuss a couple of scenes from different series that have been argued to embed instances of queer resistance. In preceding textual studies of the preselected series (namely *The Wire*, *Family Guy*, *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, *Torchwood* and *True Blood*), several strategies have been unraveled that are used in representing gay characters and gay-related themes that resist the hegemony of the discourse of heteronormativity. However, the participants were not informed on the potential resistance embedded within these series. Instead, they were asked to reflect on how gay representation is used in the scenes. These responses, often formulated as interpretations of one of the preselected scenes, formed the basis for this specific inquiry into the reading and articulating of queer resistance and heteronormativity.

2.1. Reading Articulations of Queer Resistance

In this first inquiry, the responses that touch upon articulations of resistance are being compared to the strategies of resistance ascribed to the specific series in the preceding textual analyses. Hence, this discussion departs from the two major strategies assumed to be present within popular television series, namely strategies of queer deconstruction and strategies of queer reconstruction.

2.1.1. Queer Deconstructions

First, queer resistance can be articulated by representations that aim to expose how the discursive practices of heteronormativity function. Mainly, these deconstructions expose how gender and

sexual identities are fixed into binary, rigid, and hierarchical categories, and how heteronormative norms and values are maintained.

The first set of queer deconstructions touched upon by some participants concerns the exposure of heteronormative institutions, practices, norms and values by reading in the narrative and cinematographic elements of the series the frictions and frustrations that are brought about by the diverse mechanisms of heteronormativity. A first example is given by two heterosexual male participants who point out how Kima Greggs (*The Wire*) is represented as not at ease in her relationship with Cheryl, and the consequences this has on her own life. Both participants seem to imply that Kima wants to break free from a "heteronormative" way of living. One of them, Hendrik (FG1, H, M, 27y) strengthens his argument by arguing that the scene shows Kima wearing feminine clothes, which she normally never wears. He thinks that Kima is not at ease in those clothes, and considers this a metaphor for her being stuck in a situation she rather wants to get out of. The other participant, Pieter, recalls her departure from her relationship as an illustration of her issues with a traditional way of living:

> Pieter (FG1, H, M, 26y): I do remember the discussion they have over children. And then their relationship goes on the rocks, and how she keeps on being opposed to it. "It's a cliché that also I want to have kids", while her partner does, and eventually she completely withdraws. I found that striking.

Criticism of heteronormativity is also perceived in a scene of *Six Feet Under*. The scene with the social worker has already been discussed in terms of production (see § 1.5), but is also important in a context of resistance. Participants were asked to elaborate on the way Keith Charles was busy de-gaying the house to prevail that the social worker would be fixated on elements that could be interpreted as gay or too gay. Eight participants (both heterosexual and gay participants) elaborate on the process in terms of queer deconstruction. In general, they all suggest that the scene, and series in general, expose how our society tries to mainstream and normalize gays. Ulrike (FG5, H, F, 32y) for instance, reads into this scene a criticism of depicting gays as desexualized. Alexander (FG7, G, M, 27y) agrees with this opinion, arguing that these series react against a society that accepts gays as long as if they act like heterosexual people. In addition, two heterosexual participants read into this scene a deconstruction of the idea that gay identities can be read of someone's collection of books and films. As a last example, two heterosexual participants point at how the institution of marriage is foremost constructed as a heterosexual institution. This is implied when they discuss the same-sex wedding of Kevin and Scotty in *Brothers & Sisters*. Kevin's sister Kitty, who officiates the wedding, hesitates when declaring Kevin and Scotty husbands. The participants point out how she wanted to declare them "husband and wife", and they consider this a way to show how the institution of marriage is scripted upon a heterosexual basis.

A second way to resist the oppressive mechanisms of heteronormativity is by exposing and criticizing them through representations that may be interpreted as having a gay subtext. Specifically, the

textual analysis of *True Blood* has revealed how the fantasy series uses its vampires and vampire politics to connote gays and gay politics. To inquire whether the participants read the gay subtext, and how they interpret it, the opening scene of the series was used. It features a young couple being fooled by a shop owner pretending to be a vampire, and a real vampire who is not happy to see someone mocking vampires. In the background, a television set is screening a popular talk show where the spokeswoman of the American Vampire League is being interviewed about vampire rights. Some participants (both heterosexual and gay participants) stress that they do not consider the scene or the series to function as a subtext for gays in particular but rather for minorities in general, since they read into the vampires also a subtext for ethnic minorities or HIV positive people. Yet, many of the participants agree that the series functions as a social criticism of how minorities are being treated in society, and they mention several resistant strategies that are also used to expose and criticize heteronormative practices. For instance, the opening scene is argued by many to represent a reversal of stereotypes to test the audiences' expectations. Yet, a certain ambivalence is retained, two participants argue. They argue that the series on the one hand defy the vampire stereotypes by exposing vampires as victims of discrimination. On the other, they argue that these series represent some vampires who are effectively implied to be a potential threat. However, this compares to the opinion shared by some participants that vampires represent a diversity typical for many social groups. Steven (FG5, G, M, 28y) refers to the spokeswoman of the vampires as the decent and respectable representative, whereas the real vampires are more down to earth. Two other gay participants and one heterosexual participant read the difference between the spokeswoman and the vampire as signifying the inward conflict of several civil rights movements, namely the difference between the group who wants to mainstream and assume a plain and flawless image, and those who do not want to change their image to meet the requests of mainstream society. Nonetheless, several participants argue that the gay subtext is undeniably present. For instance, Joke stresses the similarities she saw between the way vampire politics are discussed in the series, and the gay movement:

> *Joke (FG7, G, F, 32y): Because Bill tries to be the good vampire, by mainstreaming and by trying his very best to fit in and integrate, as obedient and discrete as possible. And then you have Eric and his kind of vampires who don't. And then there's that scene in which Bill gets a visit of those three vampires who rebuke him of renouncing who he is, and I've read that discussion in relation to the gay movement, where you have a group who says "you just need to try to be discrete otherwise we won't ever get accepted" opposed to those who state "we are who we are, and if I want to flaunt and get on a parade wagon, I will". That opposition, that's what I really like about the series, it shows the subtleties within a specific minority group.*

For a few participants, the religious and anti-vampire movement (Fellowship of the Sun) that values traditional family norms is also part of a subtext that exposes how contemporary society oppresses gays. Sandrine illustrates this with the movement's arguments on opposing a marriage between vampires and human beings:

Sandrine (FG6, G, F, 22y): …"And when vampires will be able to marry humans, they will undermine the institution of marriage", and they quote all sorts of arguments that have also been used to disapprove same-sex marriage.

Also, some participants refer to the intertextual references to gayness that are being used, for instance a sign that reads "God Hates Fangs" in the opening credits which the participants link to the religious right slogan "God Hates Fags" (see figure 8), or how the series names the integration of vampires into mainstream society "coming out of the coffins" which alludes to gay men and women "coming out of the closet".

FIGURE 8   *A road sign that reads "God Hates Fangs" (*True Blood*, US, 2008)*

However, not only *True Blood* is associated with using a gay subtext. With regard to the science fiction series *Torchwood*, a scene was shown in which the series' gay hero Captain Jack meets an old enemy of him, Captain John. The scene reads as a pastiche of a western duel. Both main characters meet each other in a deserted bar, and are standing opposed to one another. However, before they start fighting, they kiss each other passionately. Four participants read into the references to the western genre a parody of the traditional western which has often been theorized as having a gay subtext (e.g., Verstraten, 1999). They argue that this scene makes that subtext explicit, and defies the notion that in a macho and masculine milieu homosexual desires need to be

suppressed. Last, a few participants argue that being different in science fiction and fantasy is "normal", it is accepted. Laurie (FG8, H, F, 28y) argues that anything is possible in fantasy and notes that she would not be surprised to see gay identities in fantasy series that are fluctuating. She illustrates her argument by saying that it would not change anything if Captain Jack was together with a woman or an alien, or if Lafayette Reynolds (*True Blood*) would turn out to be heterosexual.

The third set of strategies consists of postmodern strategies that are used for parody. Here, the series relies on literalization, exaggeration, intertextuality, or hyperstereotyping to expose the way heteronormativity functions. It differs from the previous set of mechanisms since it draws predominantly on humor, and may be read as both reiterating and resisting heteronormative institutions, practices, norms and values. These postmodern strategies are most of all articulated in *Family Guy*. Many of the participants touch upon these strategies during the discussion of the fragments, albeit without calling them by name. In general, the participants elaborate on the stereotypes used in the series and argue that the stereotypes are part of the animation genre conventions, and that they are humoristic and far from homophobic. Moreover, they stress that the stereotypes are not intended as harmful. Some explain this by arguing that gay stereotypes are used to expose the process of stereotyping or homophobia, and to mock them both. For instance, when the main family's daughter Meg Griffin pretends to be a lesbian and comes out to her parents, her mother Lois gives a speech in which she states that she would love her daughter even if she was "gay, blind, or retarded" (see figure 9). Some participants read this speech as a reflection of how some people think about being gay as a physical disability, rather than assume the series shares this outdated perspective on gay identities.

In arguing that these stereotypes are exaggerated, some participants refer to the postmodern strategy of exaggeration. Furthermore, they also touch upon the concept of hyperstereotyping, which is a form of mocking and exposing stereotypes by overusing them. Next, some participants point at intertextual references that are being made. For instance, in the way the coming out scene of Meg is made into a persiflage of the coming out narrative. The use of exaggeration and hyperstereotyping is also mentioned in the discussion of the scene where Peter Griffin, the series' main family guy, is injected with the gay gene, and turns into a flamboyant queen. Hendrik (FG5, H, M, 27y) also implies that the gay stereotypes used in this specific storyline may help to confront audiences with their own clichéd images. In addition, Kristof refrains from focusing on the gay stereotypes, and points at how the series also mocks the traditional American family:

> Kristof (FG8, G, M, 25y): I have noticed that they tackle anything, and that they pretend to portray a 'family guy' and his workaday family, but in fact they want to challenge it all. With sarcasm, they want to unravel all the flaws. For instance, they even laugh with John Goodman being a glutton [...] they laugh with every behavior that is considered deviant only to shatter the myth of the perfect American family.
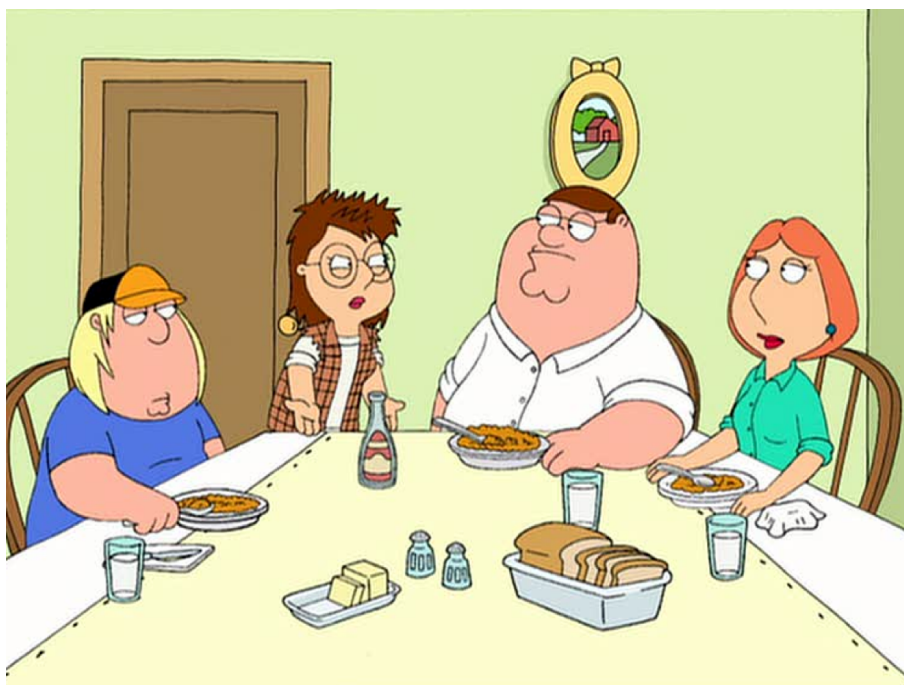
Finally, a few participants are aware of the ambivalent position of playing with these stereotypes. Hendrik (FG5, H, M, 27y) sees them as used for both humor and criticism. He thinks that one may find the stereotypes merely funny, while another may read them as criticisms of the American society. Sandrine (FG6, G, F, 22y) wonders whether the use of piling up stereotypes helps to defy gay stereotypes, or rather reiterates them.

2.1.2. Queer Reconstructions

Next, queer resistance may be articulated by strategies that aim to transgress social and cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality, and identity and thereby function as queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. Here, gay characters are represented who articulate their gender and sexual identity beyond labels and fixed identity positions, and who subversively renegotiate heteronormative practices, norms, and values.

A first set of strategies that is being brought up by participants are those concerned with representing gay identities as queer. In this context, queer refers to characters who avert self-identification, and who transgress rigid gender and sexual categories. Within the focus groups, Omar Little (*The Wire*) and Lafayette Reynolds (*True Blood*) are the characters who are most referred to as having or

articulating a queer identity. Fragments that feature Omar and Lafayette were heavily discussed in terms of diverging from the dominant or "normal" representation of a gay man. With regard to Omar, for instance, Tim (FG1, H, M, 23y) describes him as a nuanced character that diverges from the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual. In addition, Hasan (FG3, H, M, 31y) points at the interesting paradox of Omar, materialized in the fear the other street criminals have for a gay man. Next to Omar, Lafayette is described to embody a queer identity. Cindy (FG8, H, F, 25y), for instance, touches upon the fact that he does not define his sexual or gender identity and stresses that this is not necessary. Jan (FG2, G, M, 24y) agrees, and accentuates that he transcends "identity labels". In general, most of the participants describe him as a character who combines identity traits assumed to be opposites, and who plays with his identity in different contexts (see also § 1.1). In addition, some participants describe Captain Jack Harkness (*Torchwood*) in terms of having or articulating a queer identity. Their main argument relies on how he does not define his sexual identity, and how his sexual desires are kept vague throughout the series. In addition, a few participants point out how he diverges from the stereotypical image of an effeminate gay man by emphasizing on his violent and macho articulations. Two gay participants also stress how he fluctuates between masculinity and femininity. Next, two gay participants also consider Kima Greggs (*The Wire*) to embody a gay identity that is queer. For instance, Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y) praises Kima for being represented as nuanced, with bits of masculinity and bits of femininity. Finally Sarge, the man with whom David and Keith have a three-way in *Six Feet Under*, is implied by a few participants as queer (see also § 2.1.3). Even though he articulates himself as very masculine and macho, him being gay is not discussed as contradictory but rather as a pleasant surprise:

> Sien (FG2, G, F, 26y): Gay men can still surprise us. Even when you have a thousand identity characteristics that are masculine, you can still love men.

Second, queer reconstruction also relates to representations of gay characters who utter pride in being gay. Lafayette Reynolds (*True Blood*) is named by some participants as a proud gay man. Two heterosexual female participants point out how he does not hide his sexuality which makes him a powerful character since the rural context of the Deep South is assumed to be less liberal about gay issues. Other participants also read pride in his choice to wear a kilt. Further, a few participants name Omar Little (*The Wire*) as a character who is self-confident, and who does not hide his gay identity. For instance, Nicolas (FG2, G, M, 32y) describes Omar as out and proud in a criminal milieu that does not leave much room for gayness. In regard to this, Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y) refers to the way Omar made clear to other street criminals that he was going to avenge the murder of his boyfriend Brandon. Finally, Captain Jack Harkness (*Torchwood*) is suggested by some gay participants as someone who is proud in being gay. Two of them draw to this opinion by hailing how they cannot cut loose the intertextual link between Captain Jack and the actor who performs Jack, John Barrowman. The actor is described as an out, proud, and flamboyant gay man, just like his character.

Third, and in relation to the former practices of queer reconstruction, queer can also be reconstructed into gay or queer identities that diversify the spectrum of gay and queer sexualities. Again, Omar Little (*The Wire*) has been illustrated by some participants to aid the diversification of representations of gays. For instance, Jonathan (FG4, G, M, 26y) illustrates this by stressing Omar's macho behaviour. Also Sarge (*Six Feet Under*) is described as embodying a gay identity that diversifies the range of gay representations but also reflects the diversity within the gay community.

A specific strategy concerning reconstructed queerness is the representation of gay heroes. Here, the concept of hero should be interpreted as a broad concept, where a hero is mostly a character who is at the core of a series, and whose deeds and actions do not necessarily need to be morally good. Within this broad concept, the references that participants made about Omar Little (*The Wire*) can be understood as signifying heroism. Next to the character being respected and feared in the series, six participants (both gay and heterosexual) underscore Omar's strength and his refusal to be a victim. These identity traits allow the reconstruction of a gay character as a hero, even though he is a street criminal.

> Ulrike (FG3, H, F, 32y): For me, it was a revelation when I found out Omar was gay. Finally a character that isn't a victim, something I liked very much. That guy is so strong, I have lots of respect for him. He is almost never struck down, except when his partner dies. Otherwise, he has always been very strong, and I liked that very much.

Captain Jack Harkness (*Torchwood*) has also been discussed in terms of heroism, since he embodies the series' main hero role of the fantasy series. Benjamin (FG3, H, M, 20y) reads the representation of a gay superhero as a way to poke fun at those series that refrain from representing a gay hero.

Next, the representation of gays as sexual human beings can be considered a specific strategy in which gay characters are no longer represented as asexual. For instance, Omar Little (*The Wire*) is suggested by Yannah (FG1, H, F, 22y) to be represented as a sexual human being, especially in relation to other series that refrain from depicting same-sex intimacy. In addition, within the discussion on gay promiscuity in *Brothers & Sisters* and *Six Feet Under*, some participants stress that representing a gay three-way is a reflection of the fact that gays are more in touch with their sexuality, because their sexual identity has made them more conscious about their sexuality. Alexander (FG4, G, M, 27y) reads this representation as "a slice of life", since he assumes sexual curiosity to be inherent to gay men. Even though the latter remark reveals an essentialist assumption on sexual identity, the remark does stress the necessity of representing gays in various and transgressive sexual activities.

Finally, there is the strategy of representing a gay identity in a way that it is handled as a non-issue. Thereby, same-sex desire is represented as one of many possible desires. Again, Omar Little (*The Wire*) has been named by a few participants as a character whose gay sexual orientation is one of many identity traits, and whose gay sexuality is therefore depicted as a non-issue, as a state of being. Last, the gay identity of Captain Jack Harkness (*Torchwood*) is, according to some heterosexual participants, represented as a non-issue. They highlight how his ambivalent sexuality is of no major concern in the series (see figure 10).

FIGURE 10   *Captain Jack kisses his ex-lover and nemesis Captain John (*Torchwood*, UK, 2008)*

2.1.3. Queer Deconstructions / Queer Reconstructions

Even though the difference between queer deconstruction and queer reconstruction must be marked, there are representational strategies that may be considered both deconstructive and reconstructive. Here, it depends upon the specific representation whether to define the strategy as either aimed at exposing discourses of heteronormativity, or at rearticulating gay identities and gay-related themes into queer and viable alternatives which defy the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity.

A first strategy that can be both signifying a queer deconstruction and a queer reconstruction is articulated in representations that detach gender from sexual identity. These representations

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illustrate one of the prime principles of queer theory. The scene with Felicia 'Snoop' Pearson (*The Wire*) can be considered exemplary for a reconsideration of gay identities (see figure 11). Snoop is a malicious hit girl for major drug dealer Marlo Stanfield. In the scene shown to the participants, she is buying a nail gun in a hardware store. Since the character is articulating masculinity through her body, her clothing, and her speech, a butch image is created. However, none but one of the participants agrees to consider her a lesbian. They argue that her gender articulations should not be interpreted in terms of sexual identity, but rather in terms of a masculine, criminal, and macho street identity.

FIGURE 11   *Felicia 'Snoop' Pearson (*The Wire*, US, 2006)*

In relation to detaching gender from sexual identity, strategies that aim to accentuate the performance of gender can be added to the list of strategies that are both able to deconstruct and reconstruct. These strategies can expose how gender identities are in fact social constructs, and thereby refute the essentialist notion that femininity or masculinity comes from an inner core gender identity. Again, the scene with Felicia 'Snoop' Pearson (*The Wire*) evokes responses among some participants that underscore performativity of gender. These responses are tallied to the fact that some participants admit to have doubted whether the character was male or female. However, after she was established as female, her masculinity has been interpreted by some participants as a performance of masculinity. A few participants point out the criminal milieu in which she is brought

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up and operates, and describe it as masculine and tough. Another example where performativity is touched upon is in the discussion on Lafayette Reynolds (*True Blood)*. Four participants (both gay and heterosexual) describe him as a performer. Nicolas (FG8, G, M, 32y) points out how Lafayette's play with masculine and feminine identity traits are foremost performances. Two others agree, and one of them points at the difference in his public identity and his private identity:

> *Michaël (FG6, G, M, 26y): Lafayette is very 'out there'. He makes himself to a public Ghetto Queen, but that's only the public Lafayette. That disappears in the private sphere. Also, that time when he got kidnapped by Eric, his flamboyance and femininity was completely gone, and when he tries to bargain a deal with the bar woman to escape, he is a macho-man who tries to fall back on testosterone to convince the woman.*

By articulating several gender roles, Lafayette not only reveals the performativity of gender but also shows how a character can take up gender positions that transgress the binary gender divide.

A third strategy concerns the practice of a queer reversal. This is illustrated in *Six Feet Under*, more specifically in the scene with the social worker (see § 1.5 and § 2.1.1). At the end of the scene, the man turns out anything but the feared figure of heteronormativity and, above all, he is implied to be gay. Hence, the actions of Keith Charles to "de-gay" their home become reversed and their submission to heteronormative norms and values exposed and mocked. Some of our participants read the scene in a similar way. For instance, Karen (FG1, H, F, 29y) underscores how the gay characters themselves were prejudiced against the social worker, assuming he would be a heteronormative figure. However, a queer reversal does not only expose the power of heteronormativity and its impact on both heterosexuals and gays, it can also function in presenting queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. A first example is given by Steven (FG4, G, M, 28y) who finds it important that during Scotty and Kevin's wedding (*Brothers & Sisters*), men are represented in the audience who show their emotions and share in the bliss of the married couple. The participant's remark can either be interpreted as reading the representation of an emotional man as a reversal of the stereotyped man who conceals his emotions, or as a reversal of the stereotyped man who is inherently homophobic. Finally, the strategy of queer reversal is used in *True Blood*, according to some responses of the participants. They deal with the fact that every character on the show turns out to be somehow different. Karen (FG7, H, F, 29y) labels it "a community of outsiders". With regard to Lafayette Reynolds, some participants stress that his gay identity seems to be accepted in mainstream society. Moreover, Joke (FG7, G, F, 32y) urges to conclude that the series is set in a future era where the gay battles have been fought, and vampires have become the new minorities seeking for rights. She argues that this is suggested in the bar scene shown to the participants. In this scene, Lafayette is hitting on a big man who does not seem to mind (see figure12).

FIGURE 12   *Lafayette is flirting with a big man (*True Blood*, US, 2008)*

Next, certain representations can be considered to defy and/or rearticulate certain gay stereotypes. This fourth type of strategy is for instance applied in *Six Feet Under*. In response to a couple of scenes that depict Keith and David agreeing to a three-way with an acquaintance named Sarge, several heterosexual and gay participants read the representation of the three-way as nuanced and resistant in comparison to what they consider as the ubiquitous stereotype of "promiscuous gays". Some come to this conclusion by focusing on David's reserved reactions the next morning, as well in his subtle questioning of Sarge's presence at breakfast. Cindy (FG3, H, F, 25y) highlights the three-way as a positive and spontaneous event. In addition, the gay participants mostly explain the defiance or rearticulation of the stereotype. They argue that the three-way is represented as complex and something that is not taken for granted.

A fifth strategy concerns the subversion or rearticulation of iconic institutions and practices that have predominantly been defined by discourses of heteronormativity. One of the most central concepts on which participants have focused is that of domesticity, and its materialization through traditional and common practices (e.g., cohabitation, having children, defining relationships). Even though domesticity is often considered as saturated with heteronormative principles, participants illustrate with their readings of the series that certain practices of domesticity can also be interpreted from a queer perspective. For instance, some participants describe the three-way in *Six Feet Under* as part

of a rearticulated domesticity, as something that is considered normal, a non-issue, and a reflection of a daily reality. Some participants (both gay and heterosexual) affirm the representation of David and Keith's three-way as representative and realistic. They argue that gays are probably more in touch with their sexuality, and more open to sexual experiences that diverge from heteronormative sexual practices. For instance, one gay male participant links the specific representation to gay men in general:

> Alexander (FG4, G, M, 27y): Why not? It's not like they shack with someone else every week, because that wouldn't fit. But I do think it's inherent to gay men to be a little bit more curious, looking for new experiences. In that way,…why not.

Finally, the *Brothers & Sisters'* same-sex wedding ceremony may be looked at from a queer perspective. Many participants consider the representation of the wedding heteronormative (see § 2.2). Yet, Hasan (FG7, H, M, 31y) describes the ritual as a diverging from a traditional wedding. He argues that the wedding has been represented more festive, "more gay", which, according to him, makes the wedding deviate a little from a traditional normative wedding.

2.2. Reading Articulations of Heteronormativity

However, next to reading articulations of queer resistance, audiences have unraveled articulations of heteronormativity within the televised texts. Hence, this part looks into those opinions and responses in which participants argue certain representations to be heteronormative. The reason for elaborating on this aspect is twofold. On the one hand, it shows how certain representations that may have resistant potential may be interpreted in other terms than resistance, depending on, for instance, the background of the audiences. On the other hand, it underscores the presence of heteronormativity in televised texts, even when it includes resistant representations of gays.

First, this part discusses if participants pick up on representations that are implied to reiterate and consolidate the discourse of heteronormativity. Second, it looks into articulations of homonormativity. In particular, it inquires to what extent gay characters are embodying and articulating heteronormativity. Again, it should be stressed that participants were not informed about the purpose of this study, and therefore were not asked to point at representations that they consider "heteronormative". That is why some of the interpretations may not include standard terminology, but nonetheless signify aspects of heteronormativity.

2.2.1. Reiteration and Consolidation of Heteronormativity

In a first set of strategies that aim to consolidate heteronormativity gays are represented in such a way that the discourse of heteronormativity remains unharmed. In restricting gay representation to manageable identities that can be contained in binary and hierarchical categories, and in preserving the specific set of norms and values associated with the heteronormative discourse, the series are tailoring gay representation to the discourse of heteronormativity. As such, the representation of gays does not challenge the discursive supremacy of compulsory heterosexuality. In practice, it amounts to a representation where gays are, for instance, systematically depicted as asexual and/or inferior to heterosexual characters, and same-sex desire and gay identities are only represented as issues.

The representation of gays as asexual is picked up by both heterosexual and gay participants after showing the scene of *Six Feet Under* where Keith Charles is busy de-gaying their home. Steven (FG2, G, M, 28y) reads into the scene a message that says: "Welcome to our home, we are a mainstream family with nothing provocative hanging on our walls". His reading accentuates how Keith's removal pushes forward the idea that gays need to become de-sexualized since the "provocative" elements in the scene are books about style, an artistic picture of a naked man's back, and some videos. Also, Sven (FG2, G, M, 22y) argues that Keith's behavior in this scene corresponds to the character's intention throughout the series in wanting to be a masculine man whose gay sexuality is handled as a private matter. Therefore, the visiting social worker, who symbolizes the public world, does not need to be confronted with his private articulations and experiences of same-sex desire. In addition, it can be linked to the remark of some participants who point out that gays can be gay as long as they act straight (see also § 2.2.2). Some participants also point at the representation of gay characters as secondary or inferior to heterosexual characters. With regard to *Brothers & Sisters*, some participants elaborate on this representational strategy when discussing the representation of Kevin and Scotty's marriage. For instance, the couple stresses that their "marriage" is not a marriage but a civil union. Taking this into account, some participants read certain elements that occur within the scene as implying an inferior feeling in having a civil union instead of a marriage, and therefore do not deserve a wedding ceremony. Hendrik (FG1, H, M, 27y) reads into their wish not to have flowers or the fact that they have forgotten rings, elements that show how the men assume they have no right to wed in a traditional way since they are legally not allowed to marry like heterosexual couples.

Next, gayness that becomes represented in terms of an issue can be considered a second representational strategy to reiterate the notion that being gay comes with identity struggles and self-loathing. This is implied in a range of responses of a few participants who consider the representation of the three-way of Keith and David in *Six Feet Under* as not without issues. In particular, the participants focus on David's unease in the morning when he sees Sarge in their kitchen making

breakfast, and interpret his facial expressions as disapproving Sarge's presence. For instance, Hasan (FG3, H, M, 31y) thinks that David may have approved out of love for his partner who is more keen on having the three-way, while Hendrik (FG1, H, M, 27y) suggests it might be because of the idea that every gay man is more open to it. This also ties in with the reactions of other participants who describe David as a character whose gay identity is often tallied to issues of struggle.

In addition, not only gay characters are represented to consolidate heteronormativity, heterosexual characters as well are considered subject to heteronormative practices. Even though the focus group conversations were centered on gay characters, some participants have discussed a few heterosexual characters in relation to the subject matter. For instance, in *Brothers & Sisters*, Kevin's sister Kitty performs the same-sex marriage of her brother and Scotty. However, she has trouble with the words when she has to pronounce her brother and his partner as husbands. According to Marieke (FG5, H, F, 24y), Kitty stumbles over her words because she may feel uncomfortable with the marriage, despite wanting to grant her brother and his partner the possibility of getting married. Hence, this participant touches upon the privileged position Kitty is in, which can be considered a heteronormative position, where she is allowed to feel uncomfortable about two men getting married, but equally is given the privileged right to "grant" her brother the possibility of getting married.

2.2.2. Homonormativity

Throughout the focus groups, some participants also touch upon representations of homonormativity, which refers to the practices of gays appropriating heteronormative norms and values, and inscribing themselves into a heteronormative way of life. In contrast to the former group of representational strategies, gays are being mainly depicted as characters who embody heteronormativity, instead of being represented as asexual, inferior, or struggling with their gay desires and/or identity.

With regard to the focus groups, the participants mostly refer to "homonormative" practices of domesticity, where gay men and women are compared to the way heterosexual men and women organize their life. For instance, the way two participants describe and discuss the morning ritual after the three-way in *Six Feet Under* touches upon notions of a homonormative family. In particular, they focus on David's reaction of unease when he enters their kitchen in the morning to find the guy with whom he and his partner slept that night is busy making breakfast. The participants interpret David's reaction as a disapproval of the guy's pushy behavior, which is read as intrusive into their family. Hence, they interpret David as a character who wants his family to be a stable unit where strangers are not permitted to take part. This interpretation is also made by Michaël (FG6, G, M, 26y) after seeing the three-way scene in *Brothers & Sisters*. In this series, the three-way does not take place, even though Kevin's ex-lover Chad had proposed a three-way earlier on in the episode. However,

halfway having foreplay in the middle of the night, Kevin and Scotty hear a midnight knock on the door. They assume it is Chad, and they agree on letting him in to have a three-way. However, this plan is quickly called off when it is not Chad but Kevin's sister Sarah barging in. The participant stresses that this scene chooses to refrain from representing queer sex and instead brings in the family as a way to cleanse of deviant desires:

> Michaël (FG6, G, M, 26y): Instead of promiscuous sex, we get to see the bound among family members that redeems the foregoing.

In addition, issues of cohabitation are discussed in the focus group conversations. For instance, in *The Wire* a parallel montage is used to compare a gay and heterosexual household to one another. It shows Kima Greggs and her former superior Cedric Daniels each telling their "wives" at dinner a change in career that, judging from their partners' looks, is not appreciated (see figure 13). Most of the participants consider the scene as intended to establish the fact that there are no differences between a gay and a heterosexual couple. A few read this as a normalization of a gay relationship. In particular, two gay participants interpret the notion of normal in this context as heterosexual. They postulate that the gay household is a copy of the heterosexual household. In addition, Kristof (FG2, G, M, 25y) also argues that this lack of differences can be interpreted as a statement that gays do not differ in their vision on domesticity from heterosexuals. Last, two heterosexual participants argue that Kima, in general, holds on to strict binary gender roles in her relationship. They argue that Kima assumes the role of the "man" in the relationship, while her partner Cheryl is assumed to be the "woman".

FIGURE 13   *Parallel Montage comparing two dinner scenes (*The Wire*, US, 2003)*

Homonormativity is also spotted by the participants in the way *Brothers & Sisters* has represented the wedding of Kevin and Scotty. Both heterosexual and gay participants argue that the wedding is depicted like a traditional wedding. For instance, Sien (FG6, G, F, 26y) points out the reaction of Kevin's mother who says that her son deserves a marriage "like everybody else", which the participant reads as aiding the normalization of gay relationships. Some participants (both gay and heterosexual) however stress that the representation has downplayed the gayness of the characters to meet the demands of a heteronormative wedding. They argue that the characters are acting and

talking like straight characters, and that the series seems to intend that one only deserves a wedding when one performs heteronormative behavior:

> Alexander (FG7, G, M, 27y): What is intended in these scenes is that it's OK to be gay as long as you act like straight people, and that is why they also deserve a wedding, like straight people.

In general, the wedding ceremony and the grooms are argued to be represented as resembling respectively a heterosexual wedding and a heterosexual couple. For some participants, this type of representation is labeled as explicitly heteronormative. For others, this is described as normal or part of the normalization of gays.

Finally, homonormativity is connoted in the representation of vampire politics in *True Blood*. The previous part on queer resistance has already elaborated on how vampires may function as a gay subtext for gay identities, and how the representation of vampire politics may connote gay politics (see § 2.2.1). Within this discussion, some participants elaborate on the position of vampires who have chosen to integrate within the society of humans by mainstreaming. Even though homonormativity is only implied, Joke (FG7, G, F, 32y) compares the character of Bill and his choice to discretely fit in as illustrating one aspect of gay politics. She argues that within the gay rights movement, there is a distinction between those who argue that acceptance will only come by performing heteronormative behavior, while there are those who argue that this strategy restricts the articulation and celebration of their gay and queer desires and identities. The latter rather choose to be queer in spite of what mainstream society may think. Hence, vampire Bill and his fellow mainstreamers are implied to fit the concept of homonormativity perfectly.

2.3. Articulating Queer Resistance

Where the former parts have focused on what television viewers read into the representations, the next two parts inquire from what discursive position the television viewers are formulating their opinions on gay representation. Put otherwise, this part and the next study how, and to what extent, television viewers support or disapprove gay representations that may be considered resistant or heteronormative. For this part specifically, the focus is on participants who can be argued to assume a resistant discursive position. To illustrate this, responses and reactions are singled out in which resistant identity articulations are supported or praised for being resistant, or in which participants react against depictions of heteronormativity.

2.3.1. Supporting Articulations of Queer Resistance

First, articulations that deconstruct the discourse of heteronormativity are appreciated by some as ways to represent the social and political position of gays. Both gay and heterosexual participants indicate how some representations allude on the notion of a contemporary society that oppresses gays. A first element is the revelation of how our society forces gays into the closet, or expects them to de-gay or de-sexualize themselves. For instance, they refer to the scene in *Six Feet Under* where Keith de-gays their home to be heteronormative enough to please the social worker (see § 2.1.1). For instance, gay and heterosexual participants consider the representation of this situation as realistic. Tim (FG1, H, M, 23y) recognizes the situation from incidents told by gay friends who concealed their sexual identity when considering to rent a house, whereas the gay participants depart from own experiences in which they felt the need to return into the closet, and hide their sexual identity. Cindy also argues that this confrontation transcends a gay identity and may also be applied on heterosexuals:

> Cindy (FG3, H, F, 25y): I think it's normal what he's doing. I think a straight couple would do the same. You don't know how that person who's coming thinks. I guess, even when you're a straight couple and even in today's society, that it's too idealist to consider that one day everything will be accepted. I think there will always be bigots. I think it's always going to be like that. It's a pity, but that's just the way it is.

In addition, the common praise among the participants for *Family Guy* implies a common support for queer resistance. In particular, they stress to like or applaud the way the series uses stereotypes to either exaggerate some clichés for humor, or to mock the process of stereotyping, instead of using stereotypes for homophobia and bigotry. For instance, several participants consider the butch stereotypes that Meg Griffin performs when she comes out to her parents as funny and only an exaggeration of reality:

> Veerle (FG5, G, F, 27y): I think this is funny. It's a fragment that plays with stereotypes and it's done successfully. I think it's also funny since she refers to the fact that all her friends are lesbians. And that's something that is happening with lesbians in the real world, and with gays, the way they bound together, and invent a social code, like deciding one day to get a butch haircut.

Last, some participants are fond of the way *Torchwood* has played with the western genre to expose the gay subtext often implied in the western genre but never expressed or explored. Likewise, the way *True Blood* uses vampires to connote gay and minority issues (e.g., discrimination, civil rights,…) is met with appraisal among many participants (see § 2.1.1).

Second, articulations of queer identities are supported by many participants. Both gay and heterosexual participants argue to like the representations of Omar Little (*The Wire*) and Lafayette Reynolds (*True Blood*), two characters widely discussed in relation to the way they articulate

transgressive gender and sexual identities. Most of the reasons already addressed in the representations of resistance (see § 2.1.3) are supported or praised by the participants. Omar, for instance, is considered by many of the participants as being more than just a gay character. Being gay is considered just one identity trait, and his identity is diversified by for instance integrating ethnicity, social class, articulations of both masculinity and femininity, and his criminal identity. According to the participants, these elements make Omar such a positive and ground-breaking representation of a gay man:

> Joris (FG3, H, M, 22y): In The Wire, there's Omar, and I'm a big fan of him. His character is really terrific. I think it's cool he is such an edgy character, because being a gangster…you know, it's really a macho series, with very cool characters, and then this character is supposed to be the gay guy, but there are all sorts of stories around him that you would not expect of such a character.

Lafayette is praised for similar reasons. Like Omar, he is argued by many participants to articulate a gay identity that is not clean cut, where aspects of masculinity (e.g., strength, toughness, aggressive way of seducing) are mixed with aspects of femininity (e.g., caring, effeminate behavior and speech), and where his ethnicity and illegal activities are equally part of his identity:

> Laurie (FG8, H, F, 28y): Well, I've never noticed until now that he ever wore a skirt. And that's again something new you discover about him. And that's what I like about him. On the one hand, he's portrayed quite effeminate, in his way of clothing, his accessories, make-up, but also his way of talking, but at the same time, he's a muscled man, you know,...I just think it's fun to discover something new about him.

In addition, some participants also like Kima Greggs as a resistant character. Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y) describes her as "good advertisement" for gays, since her gay identity is not solely articulated along the lines of gendered stereotypes but becomes a mixture of bits of masculinity and femininity. Two other gay participants agree, and express their support for representing her as a gay female police officer who defies the butch officer stereotype. Again, the praise and support is linked to describing a gay character as a nuanced representation, where gender is not considered the sole identity trait of someone who is gay. This aligns with a reading of Nicolas (FG2, G, M, 32y) who considers Kima a role model, and who argues that "…everybody wants to be a little bit more like Kima". In addition, Pieter (FG1, H, M, 26y) considers it striking that Kima decided to oppose the cliché that any couple in contemporary society should have children. Hence, he supports her decision to diverge from a prescribed heteronormative future (see also § 2.1.1).

Finally, certain heteronormative practices and institutions that have been subverted and redefined are being supported. One of these practices concerns the experience of sexual activities that transcend the heteronormative sexual praxis. This is depicted in for instance the three-way in *Six Feet Under*, described by some participants (both heterosexual and gay participants) as a spontaneous yet nuanced sexual experience. They argue that this scene is a realistic representation,

a "slice of life". The most quoted reason for this representation to be representative is the depiction of a reality where gay men are assumed to be more curious for transgressive sexual activities. In addition, Joke (FG4, G, F, 32y) argues that gays in general are more in touch with their sexual identity and are part of a community less inflicted with taboos. In addition, it should be noted that the same arguments are made by the same participants with regard to the scene in *Brothers & Sisters* where the main gay characters consider having a three-way.

2.3.2. Against Heteronormativity

Discursive identity positions that imply a resistant perspective, can also be read of the responses in which some participants react against gay representations that they consider to be hetero- or homonormative. For instance, the discussion on de-gaying the home in *Six Feet Under* is not considered by all participants as an exposure of an oppressive reality. Korneel (FG1, H, M, 25y) even argues that their action of de-gaying the home is in conflict with the way the characters are usually represented throughout the series, namely as gays who would not hide their sexual identity. He further displeases this representation since he argues not to know any gay men who would hide their gay sexual identity.

Next, in defying the same-sex marriage in *Brothers & Sisters*, some participants resist to a heteronormative representation of gay men. They disapprove the representation of a gay marriage by making it homonormative, by copying the same traditional ritual and de-sexualizing themselves and downplaying the event so it would meet the expectations of a mainstream audience:

> Joris (FG8, H, M, 22y): It's so tame. ABC is so much friendlier for normal television viewers, never anything extravagant. I've been to a gay wedding and it's nothing like how they represent it here. It's much more spectacular, and yet they represent it here as such a stereotypical wedding, just to be treated as normal as possible, and to avoid being thought of as gay men. I think that's boring…

Finally, a few participants disapprove the way Kima Greggs (*The Wire*) is represented as a lesbian. In particular, they are displeased with the fact that she is represented as the opposite of being resistant and nuanced. Their main argument is that Kima assumes strict binary gender roles, in both her professional and private identity. They regret that she brings home her masculine work identity. Also, Hasan (FG3, H, M, 31y) argues that Kima performs masculinity in a clichéd manner, for instance when she leaves behind her partner and child without saying a word. In conclusion, they regret that Kima's representation is a reiteration of a traditional lesbian stereotype.

2.4. Articulating Heteronormativity

Last, this study discusses the discursive positions of the focus group participants who imply a heteronormative perspective. At this point, the responses and reactions of participants that act against articulations of resistance are scrutinized, and the responses and reactions that support or praise gay representations for being heteronormative. In addition, this part also takes into account appraisals of gay characters that are considered normal if the conceptualization of normal may most likely be interpreted as heteronormative.

2.4.1. Supporting Articulations of Heteronormativity

Even though the preselected scenes feature less content that may be interpreted as heteronormative than as resistant, those scenes that do touch upon heteronormative practices, norms and values were liked by some because they supported the longing for a "heteronormative" normalcy. Foremost, the same-sex marriage in *Brothers & Sisters* was discussed by some participants for these reasons. Some gay and heterosexual participants are positive about the normalization that includes gays into traditions that otherwise have been considered exclusive for heterosexuals. They applaud that the series has not represented the same-sex wedding as different than a heterosexual wedding. In addition, they stress that the gay men themselves are not stereotyped but instead represented as normal.

Besides, the scene that features the home of Kima Greggs and her partner Cheryl (*The Wire*) is also read as a normalization, supported by a few participants. They praise the representation of a domesticity that approaches its heteronormative conceptualization. For instance, Kristof reads this scene as an illustration for a "universal" and "mutual" longing for a relationship and a family:

> Kristof (FG2, G, M, 25y): In the end, we all want the same things. We want to share something with someone, and inevitably, considering our contemporary way of living together, this will take place in a family context. For instance, when you come home, you eat with your partner.

2.4.2. Against Queer Resistance

To conclude this part on the articulations of heteronormativity among the participants, some gay representations that can be interpreted as queer were questioned or resisted by some of the participants during the focus group conversations. One of the queer practices that endured much criticism is the consideration of having a three-way, especially in the way it was represented in *Six Feet Under*. Even though some participants praise the representation (see § 2.3.1), others read into the depiction of the three-way a violation of the stability within the relationship. Marieke emphasizes that she does not consider this normal since it disrupts the bound of monogamy:

Marieke (FG1, H, F, 24y): I consider this a negative depiction. Because you know, they live together. First, you see a domestic scene, in which both of them are lying in bed at night. And that is suddenly disrupted. I can't imagine that any couple would do the same when a man shows up at their bedroom door, to whom they would say: "Join us". That 's not normal for me.

Some of the other participants (both gay and heterosexual) agree with her, and argue that three is crowd. Similar arguments are made during the discussion of the three-way that almost occurred in *Brothers & Sisters*. Again, Marieke (FG5, H, F, 24y) argues that she considers it not normal to consider a three-way when you are happily married.

Second, two gay female participants touch upon and question a certain articulation of resistance within the bedroom scene of *The Wire* that features Omar and his boyfriend Dante. In this scene, Omar is fooling around with his jealous boyfriend. What is being questioned by both participants is Dante's jealousy of two women who are going to help them with a robbery. They consider it weird that Dante questions the fact that his boyfriend may desire (these) women. A rigid and essentialist interpretation of sexual identity is thereby maintained. This potential of a queer identity is further questioned by Veerle since she argues that Dante may assume that Omar is not gay because of his masculine way of talking:

Veerle (FG4, G, F, 27y): But I think it's weird, gays who question whether their boyfriend is going to shack with a woman, I think it's bizarre…Maybe because he talks so tough and un-gay, that his boyfriend wonders if he is really gay…in that way, it would make sense…

She thus rules out the possibilities of on the one hand a bisexual or queer identity where a gay man may be able to desire both men and women, and on the other hand, a gay masculine and tough identity.

At last, *Family Guy*'s articulations of resistance are not entirely appreciated. In particular, a few gay participants argue that the coming out scene is not represented in a realistic manner. They point out that the coming out is not represented as a struggle, as the coming out happens commonly and is met without much resistance by the parents. Hence, considering a representation of a gay man or woman coming out without much issues as unrealistic exposes a heteronormative perspective where gays are used to assume a hierarchically lower position to heterosexuals. It seems that the participants imply that coming out needs to be experienced in terms of struggle and conflict, where the majority of heterosexuals is granted the power to decide whether or not to accept the individual who comes out.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary setup of this reception study on gay representation was to inquire how television viewers deal with articulations of queer resistance on the small screen. Put otherwise, in order for a television text to be resistant, it needs to be read as resistant. Therefore, this study wanted to see how audiences, and in particular fans of contemporary television fiction, deal with television series that embed potential articulations of queer resistance. Hence, the aim of this research was twofold. On the one hand, it wanted to inquire how fans of contemporary television fiction read gay representation, and particularly, representations that can be argued to embed queer resistance. On the other hand, it wanted to take into account that television viewers rely on discourses to formulate their arguments. Therefore, it also inquired whether or not the fans assume a heteronormative or resistant discursive position in their readings of gay representation. To this end, this study conducted focus group conversations centered on a selection of series that have been argued in foregoing textual analyses to articulate resistance through its gay representations. However, since it was crucial not to inform the participating fans about the notions of resistance and heteronormativity, open questions about gay representation were used. Hence, many responses on gay representation in general were gathered, next to responses that express an opinion on resistant gay representations.

1. Concerning Gay Representation

With regard to gay representation in general, it should first be postulated that no major differences were noticed between the responses of the heterosexual and gay participants. Even though the heterosexual and gay participants were separated in the first focus group sessions, they discussed and (dis-)agreed with one another in similar ways across the four focus groups.

First, most of the participants describe gay characters in terms of gender and stereotypes. Both elements are often discussed together, since a gay stereotypical character is mostly described in terms of opposite gender roles (e.g., an effeminate gay man, a butch lesbian). Participants consider it important to discuss whether or not the gay character is represented as a stereotype or not. In general, most participants argue that gays are not represented as a stereotype. They point at representations where a gay identity is not solely defined by his or her sexual identity, where gender articulations vary between masculinity and femininity, and where the character is generally represented as nuanced. Some do point out the reiteration of certain gay clichés on television (e.g., gender role reversal, gay promiscuity). However, many participants stress that these stereotypes are not intended as hurtful. Especially when applied in comedy, they are considered by almost all participants as anything but homophobic. They consider these stereotypes as intended to laugh with

anybody instead of a specific minority group in particular. In addition, some point out that the stereotypes may even embed the critical potential to mock the process of stereotyping.

Second, gay representations in contemporary television series are mostly considered realistic. They are assumed reflecting the gay diversity in contemporary society. However, a few participants do point out the lack of certain gay identities. Foremost, the lack of a nuanced representation of a lesbian is missing, as well as representations of bisexual and transgender characters. In relation to this, television series are argued to mostly represent gay characters as side characters and avert representing gay characters as main characters, or in heroic roles.

Third, the participants have elaborated on aspects of production of television series, often in relation to potential audiences of these series. One of the major elements discussed in relation to both, is the role of the social and cultural context in which a series is produced. Some participants point out that most of the contemporary popular television series are produced in the USA, and argue that this cultural context interferes in the choices made by the producers, and in the way audiences deal with gays and gay-related themes. In addition, it needs to be stressed that the participants think about audiences as diverse entities. For instance, participants assume that gay audiences will read representations differently than heterosexual audiences. Finally, a few participants point out that the creation of a gay representation should be seen as part of creating fiction, and that it thus not necessarily reflects reality. Similarly, it is assumed that audiences also take into account that gay characters are part of a television reality and thus read gays on screen differently than gays in reality.

Fourth, both gay and heterosexual participants (dis)agree on the role of gay representation in television series. On the one hand, a few participants consider gay representation only one element of a specific television series that predominantly aims to entertain, and they doubt that television series can learn audiences anything about, for instance, gay rights. On the other hand, some participants ascribe a social and emancipating role to gay representation. Five specific roles could be uncovered. First, it can raise awareness of gays and gay-related themes. Second, it has the potential to emancipate gays and change the situation for gays in contemporary society. Next, it can function as social criticism, for instance exposing how gays and minorities are being treated in contemporary society. The fourth role is only discussed by gay participants, which is the potential of gay representation to function as means of identification, for instance while growing up as gay. Last, it is also considered crucial in either confirming or breaking gay stereotypes.

Even though the sexual orientation of the participants was mostly not a crucial factor in reading gay representations, there were some differences between the gay and heterosexual participants that should be addressed. The participants who identify as gay rely on their own gay identity and experiences to formulate certain opinions. This is first expressed in the way they describe gay

characters. They focus more on the characters' identity development (e.g., coming out, his or her struggles with gay desires), and they read less stereotypes or a lack of nuance in characters described by heterosexual participants as stereotypical and one-dimensional. Furthermore, they stress the stereotypical gays as realistic representations of gays who embody these stereotypes. In addition, some gay participants stress the lack of credibility in specific gay representations, foremost when same-sex intimacy comes off as inconvincible. Second, they also rely on their own identity in talking about gay representations in terms of identification. This becomes clear in how some participants stress to rely on their own "gaydar" to read someone as gay, or how some consider it important to identify with a gay character. This ability to identify with a gay character is also underscored by some gay participants who point out the role gay representations have played in growing up as gay. Yet, it should be noted that some other gay participants doubt the emancipating role of gay representations. Finally, gay participants think that the lack of main gay characters or heroes can be explained by the target audience producers have in mind, which the participants assume to be a heterosexual audience. Finally, heterosexual participants differ from the gay participants in the fact that they take their heterosexual perspective into account. This results in some participants exclaiming that they have not given it a moment's thought, the way gays are represented on the small screen. Also, one heterosexual participant thinks that television series still rely on a generalization of clichés.

2. Concerning Queer Resistance

Likewise, in the discussion of series and scenes that are considered to embed queer resistance, heterosexual and gay participants do not differ significantly from one another in formulating their opinion on the resistant representations of gay characters and gay-related themes. This does not imply that everyone agrees. The representation of a same-sex wedding for instance has been interpreted as both resistant and heteronormative. Therefore, this part of the conclusion elaborates on the way gay representation has been read by the participants in terms of either resistance or heteronormativity.

With regard to strategies of queer deconstruction, three types of strategies are implied by some participants. First, by underscoring the frictions and frustrations of gay characters that are brought about by heteronormative institutions, practices, norms and values. Second, by reading gay subtexts into certain representations, for instance by interpreting the vampire as a metaphor for a gay human being. Yet, it should be noted that some heterosexual participants argue that the vampire could also serve as a metaphor for minorities in general, rather than being limited to gays. Third, by pointing at postmodern strategies (e.g., exaggeration, intertextuality, and hyperstereotyping) that are used in series for parody, for instance the way gay stereotypes mock the process of stereotyping. Here, it

should be noted that some participants underscore the ambivalent position of a stereotype, since its interpretation as mockery or criticism may equally be interpreted as a reiteration or confirmation of one's prejudices against gays.

With regard to strategies of queer reconstruction, the participants refer to six different strategies. The major one is the representation of gay characters as queer, for instance characters who embody a multifaceted identity and who transgress stereotyped or rigid gay representations. Second, some participants point out the presence of gay characters who utter pride in being gay. Third, a few participants consider certain gay representations as diversifying the gay spectrum. Fourth, some participants emphasize the representation of a gay hero as a challenge to the dominant image of a gay character as weak and inferior. In addition, a few participants point out the fifth strategy in which a gay character is depicted as a sexual human being, and the sixth strategy in which being gay is not represented as an issue or an identity struggle.

Last, the participants touch upon the resistance in gay representations that is articulated by strategies that can either be used as queer deconstructions or queer reconstructions, depending on the context. First, many participants avert to read a character as gay solely based on gender articulations and thereby seem to agree with the queer theoretical notion that gender does not denote one's sexual identity. Second, a few participants elaborate on the gender articulations by some characters and hint at the performativity of gender by arguing that gender is a social construct and changeable. Next, some participants point out queer reversals, which are representations in which societal assumptions about gender and sexuality are reversed or transgressed, for instance the representation of a society where the gay rights battles are long over. Fourth, some participants indicate the defiance of certain stereotypes in representations that nuance what was being stereotyped. For instance, the rearticulation of the stereotype of gay promiscuity into a representation of a nuanced three-way. Finally, there are some participants who discuss the subversion of certain institutions and practices that have predominantly been defined by discourses of heteronormativity, for instance in rearticulating heteronormative aspects of domesticity.

However, not all participants agree on the potential of the scenes or series to resist. Moreover, some participants read into these scenes heteronormative or homonormative representations. Specifically, heteronormativity is noticed in three different types of gay representation.

First, some participants read a reiteration and consolidation of heteronormativity into gay representations where gay characters are depicted as asexual and inferior characters and/or where being gay is represented as an issue. Second, some participants highlight the homonormative practices of certain gay characters, represented by characters who appropriate heteronormative norms and values, for instance with regard to family or domesticity. Last, one gay participant reads

into the representations of characters that function as a metaphor for gays a reiteration of homonormative characters.

Interestingly, while few differences are noticed in the discussion between participants who are either gay or heterosexual, an element that did play a significant role in the focus group discussions was heteronormativity. Specifically, the discourse of heteronormativity has been articulated by some participants, while resistance to heteronormativity has been articulated by some others. In addition, it should be noted that there were both gay and heterosexual participants who rather assumed a heteronormative discursive position, while there were gay and heterosexual participants who rather assumed a resistant position. A resistant discursive position was implied by those participants who spoke out their support for articulations of queer resistance. First, by appreciating articulations that deconstruct the discourse of heteronormativity, for example in representations that expose how society forces gays back into the closet. Second, by liking characters because of their queer identities. Last, by supporting the subversion of certain heteronormative practices, for instance representing sex that transcends the heteronormative sexual praxis. Besides, queer resistance was also present in those responses that disapproved or reacted against heteronormativity, for example by disliking the traditional representation of a same-sex wedding. On the other hand, a discursive heteronormative position was implied by the participants who spoke out their support for heteronormativity. First, by appreciating heteronormative articulations in the series, for instance in the depiction of a same-sex wedding that is argued to look like a heterosexual wedding. Second, by reacting against articulations of queer resistance. For instance, some participants disapprove the representation of a three-way since it is a violation of stability and monogamy.

To conclude, the value of this study is twofold. First, this reception study has illustrated how gay representation in general is considered diverse and nuanced by both heterosexual and gay fans of contemporary television fiction. Second, this study has revealed how representations that articulate notions of either queer resistance or heteronormativity may be read as respectively resistant and heteronormative by television viewers, and how television viewers themselves may assume either a resistant or heteronormative discursive position when watching and reading television series and gay representation. In addition to this, this study has also illustrated that heteronormativity should be seen as detached from heterosexuality, since both gay and heterosexual television viewers who participated in this reception study have articulated queer resistance and heteronormativity.

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